

The First Presbyterian Church of Redlands
Rev. Cheryl Raine
December 8, 2019 – The Second Sunday of Advent

The First Reading is Isaiah 11:1-6, with emphasis on 1-2 and 6

- 1 **A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,**
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
- 2 The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
- 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
- 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
- 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
- 6 **The wolf shall live with the lamb,**
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and **a little child shall lead them.**

The Second Reading is Luke 1:67-79, with emphasis on 67-68 and 78-79

- 68 "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for **the Lord God has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.**
- 69 **The Lord God has raised up a mighty savior for us**
in the house of his servant David,
- 70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.
- 72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
- 73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us
- 74 that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear,
75 in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
- 76 And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
- 77 to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
- 78 By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
79 to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

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The Message is entitled, *Vessels of Peace*

Did the cadence of our call to worship begin to seep into your soul today? “Walk gently in the way of peace. Walk gently in the way of peace.” Are you walking gently in the way of peace this morning or did the morning already have its own turmoil? Are we, as a church, walking gently in the way of peace this December or are we overwhelmed with the all that is planned for this month? Or maybe the better question is how are we trying to walk gently in the way of peace with ourselves, with each other or with the world we find ourselves in?

If this cadence didn’t reach deep, maybe the metaphor of the bridge built between the two siblings in our Young Disciple time touched something deep within you. Are there trickling streams or raging rivers that run between you and another where past hurts fester? Are you the one who would ask for a wall to be built? Or would you be the one who, in seeing the bridge, would admit you were wrong and ask for forgiveness? This Young Disciple story brought to my memory a poem I wrote over twenty-five years ago about walls:

Walls come in all shapes and sizes, in a variety of textures and materials
Walls stake out property and decorate landscapes
Walls protect, walls divide
Walls provide privacy, walls hide messes,
Walls contain and categorize
Walls... I don’t want to be one or be defined by one
I want to be a bridge.

This poem brought back another memory for me, of the time when I was talking with Father Elias Chacour during my pilgrimage to Israel. He was asked about the large concrete wall that is built right through parts of Bethlehem separating and dividing Palestinian homes from their adjacent land. His response was quick and to the point, for he said cheerfully, “We just need to build more bridges.” He was undeterred by the wall. He focused only on bridge building and the possibility of reconciliation and peace. What about us?

Now Father Chacour would be the first one to admit that it is not easy to be a bridge builder. It is hard work to walk gently in the way of peace. But, we are heirs to a covenant promise, **“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”** And we know this shoot, this branch to be the Christ Child, the Prince of Peace, whom we await anew this Advent Season. Listen again to the kingdom of heaven that has come near through this child, **“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”**

This is the kingdom work to which we are called to participate in, day after day as people of the way. And if we see the wolves and the lambs, the leopards and the kids, metaphorically, we might begin to understand the work that is before us among ourselves and with all of creation. That cute hallmark card with all those animals laying down together peacefully is who we are supposed to be as God’s children. Zechariah even reminds us of this saying, **“the Lord God has looked favorably on us and redeemed us.”** We are redeemed. We are reconciled. We are at peace with God and God intends for us to be **vessels of peace** into this world.

Salim Munayer is such a **vessel of peace**. He was born in Lod, Israel and he is a Palestinian Christian and an Israeli citizen who is passionate about reconciliation. Salim formed an organization that brings together people from Muslim, Jewish, Christian, and other religious or non-religious backgrounds

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to pursue reconciliation through the biblical principles of peace, tolerance, and love. He reminds me of the work of that I experienced through Father Chacour, a Melkite Catholic Christian.

Salim shares that through Scripture we often see God meet people in the desert. And so, his organization's Bridge Building encounters take place in the desert, because the desert is a place of transformation in scripture. The desert becomes a place where people can start to engage with one another, where they can begin to tell each other their stories. Salim reminds us that Scripture calls us to love our enemies, those whom we have demonized and dehumanized and that is why his participants get to know each other as real people. They listen to each other's pain and past. They learn about each other's culture. They also learn how they have caused each other pain, individually and as people groups. It also takes a willingness for all involved to look into the socioeconomic and political actions that cause pain. This way of peace must be walked gently as everyone's pain is held.

Salim reminds churches that they have a prophetic role in society, for churches need to be like Nathan speaking truth to the power. Salim knows that to address the dynamic of the imbalance of power in any nation state, the change must rise up from the bottom. The good news he shares is that when you reach just 2 to 3 % of any population, you can begin to make change happen. Salim is committed to walking gently the way of peace and by doing so he is transforming lives through his organization.

Closer to home we have those in our community who are walking gently the way of peace by building bridges, which transform lives. The Youth Hope Foundation was created because Heidi Mayer, a person of Christian faith, realized that she could no longer sit on the sidelines knowing that there were thousands of youth who were abused, neglected, and going hungry everyday in our regional area. The organization she founded provides a support system for youth in a safe and caring environment so they may grow to be healthy, self-sustaining adults. Many of us know the work of Youth Hope and some among us have even volunteered with the organization. Heidi and the organization she created is a **vessel of peace** for troubled youth in our region.

The University of Redlands, a central part of our community, has been working hard to make diversity, inclusion, and equity a priority on campus," said Amy Moff Hudec, associate director of community learning and student affairs. "Better Together," a budding University of Redlands interfaith student association is an example of this hard work. The group is applying the scriptural injunction "don't be overcome of evil but overcome evil with good," in new and unique ways. It's a tenet enjoined in the teachings of many of the world's great religions. I was a part of a dinner gathering of this student lead interfaith group earlier this year. We enjoyed a wonderful meal and listened to readings from various faith traditions and spent time getting to know each other. By walking the way of peace gently with each other, stories were shared and bridges began being built between students and community members of different faith traditions. As a result of my participation in this dinner, I was invited to a breaking of the Iftar fast in the home of a Muslim women where nearly 30 of us gathered. It was a wonderful evening of building bridges through encounter, as we began the dismantling of walls between faith traditions.

What I have come to understand about the way of peace is that it takes many forms. Yet, none of these forms come to pass without initiative. Salim, Heidi and the students of the University started organizations designed to build bridges, which promote the way of peace. Churches have been involved in hands on peacemaking, as I read of Mayada Jazrawi, who oversees the prison visitation ministry of the Presbyterian Church in Kirkuk, Iraq. The prison population of 52 women and 15 children, comprised of widows of suspected ISIS terrorists. One of the women prisoners said of the church visitors, "I had never seen people who wanted to **plant peace** and who exemplified the love of God more." Churches also help

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us learn to be vessels of peace through curriculum development and I wanted to highlight one curriculum that has been recently published by the Episcopal Church entitled, *Sacred Ground*.

The church introduces the curriculum saying, “Sacred Ground is a sensitive, prayerful resource that creates space for difficult but respectful and transformative dialogue on race and racism. It invites participants to walk back through history in order to peel away the layers that brought us to today, reflecting on family histories and stories, as well as important narratives that shape the collective American story. Sacred ground holds as a guiding star the vision of beloved community, – “[Where] **the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together,**” where all people are honored and protected and nurtured as beloved children of God, where we weep at one another’s pain and seek one another’s flourishing. Could this be work that we might engage in the coming months in our own diverse church and in our larger community where walls and divisions persist between us?

“The Lord God has raised up a mighty savior for us to guide our feet in the way of peace.” The way of peace takes many forms. But more importantly, the way of peace takes a commitment from each of us to not sit on the sidelines anymore.

I don’t know what is stirring within you or where the need for peace most tugs at your heart this December. I just know that our lives are often anything but peaceful in December and the world around us certainly is not at peace, as violence and tragedy continue to wreak havoc.

I personally know that every December I have to reach deep and be intentionally attentive to my spiritual disciplines to remain peaceful during this hectic season. I have to deeply listen to my own spirit and body, allowing ample time to be quiet and still, as I set aside all that presses in. Hence, why I chose to work from the solitude of my home this past Wednesday as it rained. It was a productive and renewing day that helped me walk gently in the way of peace.

Being **vessels of peace** to those we encounter, being at peace with ourselves, takes intention and commitment. We must learn to stay open and connected to the Divine Source, the Prince of Peace, through prayer and silence, through worship and spiritual readings, through the natural world and music. I do not know what connects you most deeply with the God whom we worship, but each of us must cultivate spiritual disciplines – prayer, silence, spiritual reading, worship, beloved communities - that we can incorporate into the rhythms of our daily lives to be ever more attentive to the way of peace we are called to walk.

Walking in this way is not easy for me nor do I suspect for any of us. Yet, this is our call. As December continues to unfold, may we seek God’s favor and grace as we walk the way of peace gently. Amen.