

Rev. Lynne Ogren Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
December 8, 2019 Advent 2, Year C
Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Last year we saw in the news the story of Amber Guyger, the Dallas police officer who mistakenly entered the wrong apartment in the building where she lived and shot and killed Botham Jean, thinking he was an intruder in her own apartment.

This fall we watched in amazement when Botham's younger brother, Brandt, asked the judge to hug that same police officer after she was convicted of murdering his brother. This week Brandt Jean received the 2019 Ethical Courage award from the Institute for Law Enforcement. And he had some strong words for us all, as reported in the Dallas Morning News.

"I want you all to know that I am not a threat, that young black males are not inherently dangerous or criminal," Brandt Jean said from a podium at the institute. "I implore you to champion policies and procedures that amplify the value of all lives. I insist that you encourage diverse leadership that can model inclusion and restraint.

"Most importantly, I ask that you remember my brother," he continued. "And when you remember him, I want you to ask yourself what are you doing to ensure there will be no other families like mine — no other little brothers that have to model ethical leadership in forgiveness of a cop whose lack of training and discipline caused them to carelessly take the life of another."¹

The words of all three of our scripture readings this morning proclaim a new way of living. They call us to see the world differently, seeking the wellbeing of all, and to shed the things that keep us from being in full relationship with one another. The younger brother of Botham Jean gives us a glimpse of what that new way of living can look like.

The message this morning is a call to peace.

The passage from Isaiah has inspired many artists to portray that vision of the "Peaceable Kingdom". Paul calls the Jewish and Gentile Christ-followers in Rome to "live in harmony with one another". And John the Baptist, more harshly calls those who have come to the river to repent and live in ways that bear good fruit.

Last Sunday when you wrote your prayer petitions on the blue bulletin inserts, the hope that was offered up the most was the hope for peace.

We do not live in an urban setting with much ethnic diversity. So maybe we think we don't have the same kinds of presumptions or prejudices that led a white, female cop to shoot a

¹ <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/courts/2019/12/03/i-am-not-a-threat-botham-jeans-brother-says-as-he-accepts-award-from-police-training-group/>

black man in his own home. The reading from Isaiah helps us take a more imaginative view of how those who are different from and usually opposed to one another, might somehow live together peaceably.

I know some of you raise sheep. While we don't have wolves here, imagine a coyote living with the lambs in your fields. If you've ever watched the Animal Channel, you know that it is unlikely that a leopard would curl up next to a yummy young goat or gazelle.

Ranchers know of the danger of bears and mountain lions to their cattle. Yet Isaiah's prophesy for God's people calls us to imagine the impossible—the bringing together of those who are at such odds with each other.

In order for the predators and the prey in Isaiah's peaceable kingdom to live together, both require a change of heart. The instinct of the predator to attack must be cut off. And the prey's fearful heart must be strengthened to face what once made them want to run.

Neither the lion nor the lamb can make those changes on their own. The same is true for us. John tells us that Jesus, the one who is more powerful than he, will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, burning the chaff of our hearts—whatever thoughts or feelings that keep us from being in peaceful relationship with those around us.

The fire image can be frightening, and it might be tempting to let our imaginations rest there. But let's back up to the part about Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit. Take a look at the Isaiah reading again with me.

The new ruler that will come from the family of King David—a dynasty that God had cut down for their disobedience and faithlessness—that new ruler will have the spirit of the Lord rest on him. Now listen to the next part.

“...the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.” Does that sound familiar? This is the same blessing we pray over each person who comes to the waters of Holy Baptism. This is the same blessing we pray over our Confirmands and our New Members when they affirm their faith in the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The blessing of the Spirit Jesus receives at the start of his ministry in his own baptism is the same blessing of the Spirit we receive in our baptisms.

Isaiah goes on to say that this new ruler—whom we claim as Jesus Christ—will not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear. Instead he will judge with righteousness and equity so that the weak and vulnerable are strengthened. And by the breath of his word the wickedness that wields power over others will be eliminated.

THEN, the wolf that is no longer aggressive will live with the lamb that has been given new courage. You see, the wolf is not killed, only the wickedness within will be killed.

Each of us does not fit neatly into either of the categories of the weak or the wicked. We have some of each within us on any given day.

Who are the ones you struggle to live with in harmony?

Who are the ones you are critical of? Who do you fear?

Who are those you have hurt? Who holds power over you?

This week in Confirmation class we learned about the Prophets, like Isaiah, who brought God's word—both a word of warning and of promise—to God's people. We wondered together who the prophets are today. It was rather easy to think about the famous people like the Pope or Martin Luther King, Jr. The kids also identified pastors as prophets—a role most pastors find daunting!

But notice in the midst of the peaceable kingdom Isaiah imagines that a child leads the animals, both predator and prey. Children come to us as innocent, without prejudice or fear. They learn those things, sometimes at a much younger age than we would like.

Maybe you have seen the photo on social media of two little kindergarten boys who get the same buzzed haircut and wear the same shirt to school, and they can't wait to show themselves to their teacher because they are sure she won't be able to tell them apart. The boys didn't notice that their skin colors were not at all the same.

Those little boys are God's prophets, proclaiming the hope of a peaceable kingdom. Botham Jean's younger brother is God's prophet, proclaiming the hope of a peaceable kingdom.

In this Advent season we wait for the child who was born in Bethlehem and we praise him as God's promised king who is bringing forth God's peaceable kingdom. And we who believe and follow this Christ are branches of the shoot that springs forth from the root of that age-old tree of God's chosen people.

We have been blessed with the same Spirit as Christ himself—the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. God has breathed the breath of the Spirit into us, and by this breath we are filled with all joy and peace in believing, as Paul writes, so that we may abound in hope.

Hope for a different future. Hope for empowering the weak and growing compassion in the powerful. Hope for a kind of peace that can only come from God's presence and power at work in and among us.

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Thanks be to God! Amen