

Advent 1: God's peace is at hand. Come, walk in the way of God's heart
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Text: Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14

This morning we officially begin our journey through Advent. During this liturgical season of the church we ponder once again the great mystery of the incarnation when God came near to us in the form of a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. At the same time we also remember our calling to expectantly wait for the return of Jesus.

During this particular season of advent we will be dwelling on walking in the way of God's heart. This notion of walking in the way of God has a double meaning. First it reminds us of trying to walk like someone else walks. I remember being a young child and trying to imitate how my grandfather walked, even to the point of having pictures of me trying to walk in his old farm boots. Walking in the way of God lends itself to consider how do we walk like God. Secondly though it also speaks of walking in the direction of someone such as on a journey or pilgrimage. In either case we must first consider who God is before we can try to emulate God's steps or action of walking.

This morning the lectionary texts come from the Prophet Isaiah and from Paul's letter to the Romans. Perhaps at first glance it is not apparent the connection between the texts, and yet as we sit with them both today, we will see how they bring into focus today's theme of God's peace is at hand.

I think though we should first have a reality check of what is our context today in Goshen, Indiana. This past week's news, not altogether different from previous weeks, was flooded with stories of heartache, pain, terror, violence, destruction, and death. In addition to despair and hopelessness our world, our country, our schools, our churches, our homes, and our hearts are also at times flooded with fear. Fear of the unknown, fear of terrorists, fear of

violence, fear of the future of our country, fear of the other. In the midst of Advent, in the midst of waiting to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the World, in the midst of waiting for the return of that Savior, what do we do with our fear? What around us causes us to feel unrest? What robs us of our peace? As we consider the word to walk in the way of God's heart how does Jesus shepherd us into peace? How are we joining God's Spirit in ushering in God's peace?

Our first text comes from the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah's world, not that different in some respects from our current context, was a world familiar with terror and war. They too were familiar with hate, unrest, violence, destruction, and fear. It is within that context, which strikingly resembles our own, that Isaiah delivers this vision of a world that is filled with and founded upon peace. If we backed up to chapter one we would read Isaiah's assessment of how things are going. This is a sinful nation, ones that have turned their backs on God, engaged in evil assemblies, whose hands are full of blood. Out of this context of disarray Isaiah shares the vision he has concerning Judah and Jerusalem. In the midst of war, unrest, lack of peace, violence, and destruction Isaiah stands up and says "I see a vision of a different way." Or "If we are to follow in the way of God's heart things can look different. We can look different. In fact relationships between countries can look different. The world, under the Lordship of Yahweh, can and will be different."

Isaiah's image begins with this key eschatological phrase "in the last days." It is not a vision that Isaiah thinks will happen today, or even tomorrow. Instead it is a vision that describes a time that is coming. In a significant way Isaiah is holding out this vision for what is coming and we will see how the text in Romans tells us how to function and live while we wait for the fulfillment of that vision of peace.

Back to Isaiah's vision we read of the centrality of worship of One God, in One location, by many people from diverse backgrounds and nations. Together they will gather on the mountain of the Lord to be taught by God so that they might walk in God's path after God's heart. In addition to being taught how to walk in God's path, people from every nation will experience God serving as their judge as God settles disputes for many peoples. From that process the people, those from every nation, will take their swords – their prominent image of warfare and protection – and refashion and repurpose them into plowshares – an image of agriculture and provision. These same people will take up their spears, used in battles, and refashion and repurpose them to be used as pruning hooks. Instead of something sharp meant to wound or kill, they will transform the spear into a device meant to tend to plants to allow for further growth and greater yields of crops.

Anabaptists have gravitated towards this passage to help to articulate our peace theology and pacifistic stance. In our 1995 Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective this vision from Isaiah is called the original vision of peace and justice.¹ The images it evokes is striking and inspiring as it gives a clear picture of the transformation that occurs when one has come to the mountain of the Lord, received teaching, and experienced a call to live and act and help to usher in peace. The response is not to continue to study for war, or to continue to create additional swords or spears or weapons of mass destruction. Instead, the only response is to refashion, repurpose the tools at our disposal to become agents and tools of peace.

Isaiah continues his vision by sharing that within this image nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore. What a glorious, refreshing, hope-filled, peace evoking image! I don't know about you, but studying this text this week in light of our currently realities made me want to pray that those last days are sooner rather than later. What a

difference this vision was from the current experience in Isaiah's days, as well as from our realities today in 2016. Perhaps though like me you find yourself thinking "Well, that is a lovely image. However, it is so very far from our current experience, and honestly hard to imagine that it could ever come to be, so thanks Isaiah for that nice image. We will just tuck it away and perhaps consider it again on a rainy day, but really Isaiah? There is no way! It's hopeless."

However, Isaiah concludes the word of this image in verse five with an invitation to the house of Jacob. He says, "Come, house of Jacob, (and I add, Come, house of Waterford) let us walk in the light of the Lord." It is as if Isaiah is saying, come, it is not hopeless. Come, make a choice today to be part of the creating and unfolding of this vision. Come, be diligent about where and how you are walking. Come, turn from darkness, war, violence, fear and walk in the light, in the way of God's heart, in the way of peace.

Now turn with me to Romans chapter thirteen as Paul provides additional information on how we can follow Isaiah's invitation to walk in the light of the Lord. We begin in verse eleven with three simple words, "And do this..." When you read this did anyone else scratch your head and ask the next logical question, "do what?" This is an example of a text being inherently connected to the previous text. So we move back up to verse eight where we find Paul in the middle of a teaching to the followers of Jesus. Here in these three verses Paul highlights that all the commandments could be summed up in one: Love your neighbor as yourself. He goes on to expound on this simple truth by sharing that "Love does no harm to its neighbor." In Paul's understanding "Love is not an undefined ideal. Its practice is measured by the observance of specific commandments. (*for example*) It is not possible to love and also commit adultery, kill, steal, or covet."ⁱⁱ So the "And do this" refers back to fulfilling the law by loving our neighbors as ourselves. And we should do this, engaging in this love movement, because we recognize and

understand the present time. And what time is it? Night has not ended, but it is far advanced, meaning that the day is coming. You know, *that day*.

As Paul reminds his listeners that *that day* is coming he also instructs them that it is time to wake up from their slumber, to put aside the deeds of darkness and to put on the armor of light. He instructs them to put off the behaviors of the night and clothe themselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. What does this all mean for Paul's listeners and for us today? Paul reminds the Roman believers, and us, that they must think differently than their neighbors. Baptism into Christ and the Christian church called for a different life.ⁱⁱⁱ Followers of Jesus, both then and now, face many temptations that desire to take our attention and focus off of Jesus. As we shift our focus off of Jesus we can allow the lure of evil of all kinds – wealth, greed, self-protection, addictions – as well as the messages of this world to infiltrate our hearts – be afraid, are you safe, you are not enough, you don't have enough, look out for yourself, try to obtain more wealth and power, fear those who are different from you.

Here Paul employs the familiar imagery of taking off and putting on clothes (Isaiah used the image of swords/spears into plowshare/pruning hooks). The purpose of taking off is not to create a vacuum. Instead it is to make way to put on something different. While this sermon is not a sermon to tell you what to wear, it is a sermon to tell you what to wear within our sphere of influence. Our society focuses a lot of on clothes – the current fashion, the name brands, the right colors to wear together, etc. However, the clothes we wear do communicate something. Now, I know that Paul is not really talking about the clothes we are wearing, it is simply a profound metaphor. However, it does connect with us when we think about our clothes. Think with me for such a minute about this analogy. All clothes do have the basic purpose of providing coverage and warmth to our bodies. But if you are like me I have different types of clothes. I have clothes

I wear to office. I have clothes that I wear to exercise in. I have clothes that I wear to dig in the dirt in my garden. They are all clothes, and yet are all different.

I remember growing up with a mother who worked nights as a nurse at the local hospital where she would work for 43 years. It was back in the day when my mom used to wear the white nurse dress uniform. At home, mom didn't wear this dress, these clothes. She usually wore navy or black slacks with a brightly colored shirt. However, when she pulled out the white dress, we knew that she had a specific task to do. She had an identity and role that was communicated simply by what she wore. If she stopped by the grocery store on the way home, which she often did, the cashier knew what my mom was about. She was a nurse. Furthermore her dress became a tool for her role, her task. Her dress had large pockets in the front that would hold her stethoscope, timer, pad and paper, and cordless phone she would carry as the charge nurse. Her clothes mattered to the type of role she was to play, and to the tasks she was to accomplish.

In the same manner Paul is telling us that as we wait for the coming of the full vision as outlined in Isaiah to take stock, what kind of clothes are we wearing? And Paul goes a step further to tell the Romans, and I believe us, that the clothes we are wearing are not the right ones. We need to wake up, take stock, take off the clothes of the night of darkness, and choose to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ.

This is not the only time in Paul's writing that he employs this language of taking off and putting on clothing. In this context he simply says to clothe ourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ. And perhaps if you are like me you might scratch your head again and say "Well dear Paul, that sounds dandy but what does that mean? Or how does that look?" So for that I would invite you turn ahead several books to Colossians chapter three beginning in verse twelve. There we read these familiar words also from Paul: "Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved,

clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.” Hmmmm... maybe we prefer the more abstract description in Romans? This list is pretty specific and direct. If we only had the text in Romans we could try to manipulate it to mean what we would like it to. However, here Paul is clear – this new clothing includes compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. However, Paul doesn’t stop there. He continues in verse thirteen: Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity.” While each of these virtues are ones we can direct towards ourselves, they are inherently meant to be directed to another. They describe a way to relate to the other, both near and far, and over all the virtues we are instructed to bind them all together in love. Hmm... and in Romans Paul says that the commandments could be summed up by one: Love your neighbor as yourself.

Back in Colossians Paul sums it all up by saying “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.” Isaiah’s image of one of peace. Of learning from the one true God and then going out to transform our weapons into tools of peacebuilding and productivity. Our swords into plowshares. Our spears into pruning hooks. Yes, even though the fulfillment of Isaiah’s image is not come yet, Paul reminds us that the day is coming and as we await that day we also have a role and task to be about now. Mainly, our task is to take off the clothes of darkness, and put on the clothes of light while walking in the pathway of peace in the way of God’s heart.

There is also a communal aspect to this message. I remember when Pastor Velma preached on John chapter 11 and the death of Lazarus. Within that text Jesus is summoned but arrives too late and Lazarus died. Jesus goes to the tomb which is covered by a stone and he

instructs them, “take away the stone.” And Martha, always frank, reminds Jesus that it has been three days and so Lazarus is going to stink. Jesus presses on and says “Lazarus, come out!” Well he did, but he was wrapped up with grave clothes. And Jesus looked to those around Lazarus and said “Take off the grave clothes.” In her sermon Velma challenged us to allow others to help us take off our grave clothes, those things that hold us and keep us bound, those things that reek of death. In a similar way, I wonder how we can inspire, encourage, and challenge each other to put on the clothes of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience and binding them all together with love. As a community that is striving to walk in the way of God’s heart can we strip down some of our pretenses and have honest and authentic conversations about the times and experiences when it has been delightful to wear the clothes of Jesus. And can we also be honest and authentic about the times we have realized we were still clothed in the clothes of darkness, of night, of fear. Together may we grow as people who are constantly evaluating what we are wearing, what image we are projecting, and if we are truly living as people of God’s peace.

You are right. The image that Isaiah shared is not fulfilled yet. However, you and I have a role to play to help bring that image to fulfillment and I believe that it begins by honestly considering the clothes we are wearing. Then after removing the clothes of darkness God helps dress us to look more and more like God’s son whom we earnestly wait for this season of advent. God’s peace is at hand. Come, walk in the way of God’s heart. Let us be people who seek, proclaim, and work for peace.

ⁱ *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, Pennsylvania), 81-82.

ⁱⁱ John E. Toews, *Romans: Believers Church Bible Commentary* (Herald Press: Scottsdale, Pennsylvania), 320.

ⁱⁱⁱ Toews, *Romans*, 329.