

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

December 4, 2016  
*2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent*  
Romans 15:4-13 & Isaiah 11:1-10

### **The Hope Bridge**

With the illumination of Christmas lights at home, at church, and in town, there is no doubt that we are now fully into the season of anticipation, the season of expectation, and the season of hope. Now, depending on your perspective, the anticipation, expectation and hope have different focal points.

For students, young and old alike, it's anticipation of the end of the fall term and the Christmas break that follows. It's the expectation that with the transition from schoolwork to time off, there will be a well-deserved change of pace. And, it's the hope that things will be as good or better when school is out.

For retailers, the anticipation is robust holiday sales. The expectation is that the holiday sales will put the business financial ledger firmly in the black. And the hope that retailers have is that they will be poised for a strong start to the soon-to-begin new year.

For Christians, this season has multiple layers of anticipation, multiple layers of expectation, and multiple layers of hope.

On one layer, it's about the anticipation of that celebration of Jesus' birth at Christmas—born in Bethlehem, visited by shepherds and wise men. It's the expectation of pondering anew how that birthday celebration is a renewal of our faith as we thank God for the greatest Christmas gift. And it's the hope that we will grow in faith as we go through that celebration again.

At a somewhat deeper layer for Christians, this season anticipates the acknowledgment again that in Jesus, God became flesh and dwelt among us. It is the expectation that God's gift of incarnation will spur the church—the people of God—to witness to this powerful history-changing event. And it's the hope that this incarnation is life-changing in those who encounter the Christmas story in its fullness.

At a third, and even deeper layer, the Advent season of anticipation, expectation and hope is a gift that we as Christians accept and then in turn offer to the wider world itself. It's this third layer of meaning that is referenced in our scripture passages from Isaiah and Romans that we have just read.

In these first 3 weeks of Advent this year, we're focusing on the words of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah we find future-oriented words that gave hope to the people of Isaiah's time and that have continued to give the people of God hope across the ages right up to our own day. As Jody has shared in her recent preaching, our local Rabbi, Ed Stafman, who is a friend of our congregation has suggested that there are 2 visions in the Hebrew Bible of the future messiah who is promised to come or to come again. One is represented in books like Ezekiel where violence and destruction and suffering will precede the ultimate judgement. The other vision is represented in the books like Isaiah where peace and harmony and justice will come with the promised messiah. Rabbi Ed has said that these 2 contrasting visions are both legitimately presented. It's for us to choose which of these competing prophecies we want to embrace. We, of course, have chosen the vision of harmony, peace and justice.

As Christians, we affirm that Jesus who was born 2000 years ago in Bethlehem is the fulfillment of these prophecies, and that with the coming of Jesus, a new era was ushered in. At the same time, we also affirm that God's ultimate fulfillment of these prophecies comes with God's primacy over all time and history. We talk about Jesus' second coming as a way of looking to that fulfillment.

The first 10 verses of Isaiah chapter 11 present some evocative imagery that inspires much thought and reflection. One pastor describes it this way. “The text is a hinged pair of paintings. The panel on our left shows a young king. He exudes vitality and strength, severity and a brilliance of joy; deep wisdom is in his eyes. On a distant hill behind him, cruel-faced monarchs lie dead. Nearer to him is a gathering of the poor, whose faces are lifted and radiant. The panel on the right is a fantastic bestiary. There are sleek, beautiful carnivores—leopard, wolf, lion, bear; and there are domestic animals—calf, lamb, ox, goat. The predators and their edible counterparts are lounging together. A child sings to them while toddlers play by the nests of quite peaceable rattlesnakes. Beneath each panel of the diptych is an inscription; the first reads *Justice*, the second says *Peace*.” (Paul Simpson Duke, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 1*, David L Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2006 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 27)

This fantastic bestiary, as he describes it, is indeed a fanciful vision of a peace that is almost beyond possibility. It has inspired numerous artists to render the fantastically surprising turning on its head of the natural order. While we recognize the animals mentioned and pictured, they might as well be like some of the magical beasts found in the recently released movie of J.K Rowling, *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. Because like the magical beasts in the movie, the beasts in Isaiah’s vision are equally fanciful—a gentle vegetarian wolf, a similarly subdued leopard and lion and bear. And how about the once venomous snakes becoming as gentle as a family pet. On the one hand they’re almost laughable. But on the other hand they become powerful visual symbols for the peace—the perfect peace—that is coming, to be ushered in in the fulness of time. It’s a peace that goes way beyond a cessation of violence and the quieting of disagreements. It’s a fundamental reorientation of relationships as we know them. No two parties are beyond the possibility of reconciliation. No divisions that we know and accept will be sustained in the fulfillment of Isaiah’s vision. This vision of peace is inspiring because it is so fanciful—so beyond what we’re experiencing in our day in the here and now.

While it has not been as evocative when it comes to artistic rendition, the other panel in this 2 panel display is equally as fanciful. I’m talking about the panel on the left entitled Justice. This is the one with the new king, a king who is in the line of the greatest king in Hebrew history, King David, inaugurating a new era of perfect justice.

From time to time, we may like to think that in the contemporary history of the modern world we have overcome injustice, foolishness, insensitivity, rudeness, arrogance, xenophobia and fear of the other. But time and again, these negative traits and sinful conditions have reared their ugly heads. And sometimes the rearing of this ugliness and sinfulness comes when we least expect it, just when we think we have forever laid them to rest. Isaiah’s vision infuses us with hope that even in the darkest times that we may face, even in times when it seems that even the definition of justice itself is being redefined and cheapened, God’s vision of true and perfect justice will reign supreme.

The vision is powerful and evocative in what it affirms, and in doing so what it squelches.

- This promised one shall have “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding” Not a spirit of foolishness and not a spirit of superficiality.
- This promised one shall have “the spirit of counsel and might” Not a spirit of isolation and unsupported convictions.
- This promised one shall have “the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” Not a spirit that spurns understanding and not a spirit of arrogance.

- The promised one shall “not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth”
- The promised one “shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.” Not self-righteousness and not haughtiness.

What a fantastic vision that Isaiah paints of the messiah bringing justice that stands in stark contrast to so much of what we hear in our world today.

Both of these fanciful visions—that of peace and that of justice—rise to a level that inspires us to look above the reality in which we live, and that inspires us to cling to a hope that is behind these prophetic promises.

It is hope that ties these two visions together. Hope is the bridge between justice and peace.

This is what we read about in Paul’s letter to the Romans when he says, “For whatever was written in the former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4)

Pastor Joanna M. Adams writes, “The hope of which Paul writes is not a pie-in-the-sky kind of optimism. Neither is it a cheery denial of the painful realities of life and death, injustice and suffering. Paul has wagered his life on a hope that is grounded in the promises of God and looks forward to the reality to which the gospel of Jesus Christ bears witness. Hope is the undaunted force that comes from the Holy Spirit, getting into our human spirits and drawing us beyond the darkness of today and toward the light of the new tomorrow. Encouraged by the marvelous things God has already done, we abide in hope for what is not yet but will surely come to be.” (*Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Vol. 1*, David L Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, gen. eds., © 2006 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 41)

My friends the hope bridge that spans the visions of perfect justice and perfect peace that are promised in the coming of the messiah is the same hope bridge that spans the chasm between the cold cruel reality of the world in which we live and the world that is renewed with the coming of the Savior.

That’s what is the deeper and fuller meaning and significance of our Advent waiting of anticipation, expectation and hope.

And now, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 15:13)