

Sermon on Isaiah 11:1-9 Peace

God, my God,
my life has suddenly changed.
I feel numb and unbelieving,
stunned and alarmed.
It does not seem possible that our life could be so quickly turned upside down.
Comfort us, o God,
Wait with us while we try to grasp the truth.
Slowly reveal to us what we need to accept.
As the layers of the days ahead unfold
keep us safe in the shelter of your love...
embrace us, hold us, lead us...

This prayer could have been spoken by the prophet Isaiah as he sees things that he really would prefer not to see. He walks through his home town and foresees the destruction of his people. He walks through the forests of Jerusalem full of beautiful cedar trees. Lovely places to walk, alley ways of overwhelming beauty, pathways and clearings, sunshine, and colourful flowers covering the forest floor... a peaceful place, a magic place, home and shelter for countless birds and animals. It has taken centuries to mature and grow.
And then, as if somebody hits Isaiah on the head, then this vision comes to his mind: an awful image of it all being destroyed. Cut down the forest, logs and branches taken away. Fruitful land turned to waste and desolation.
Devastated Isaiah walks through it, thinking of all it is now, but knowing that the end will surely come. All shattered, all gone, all lost.

Isaiah 10:33 - 34

**33 Look, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the tallest trees will be cut down,
and the lofty will be brought low.**

**34 He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,
and Lebanon with its majestic will fall.**

Moments or hours later, maybe days – we don't know... Isaiah sees another image. Like a saving angel, a new vision comes to his mind. In his mind's eye Isaiah can see that from the stump of the mightiest tree there peeks out a frail green shoot.

It is not all lost, Isaiah thinks. There is hope for the future. It may be fragile, it may be a long time off, but for him hope is assured. He doesn't ask how, and when, and why... He just knows it – as well as he knows that he will not be able to prevent the decay.

And he knows one more thing: he knows that he will have to wrap his glimpses of hope carefully, that he will have to preserve them safely, and that eventually he will have to share them thoughtfully with those who will need them most. He will bear these thoughts of hope through the times of evil and pain, and he will make sure that he doesn't lose them while war and destruction are holding his small country in their grip.

Soon after, the Jewish people had to go into exile in Babylon. As so many times before the small nation of the Israelites had been defeated by giant enemies. Their world had within moments turned dark, desolate and bare of hope. All the things they had based their security on had gone: the promised land, the holy city, and worst of all the temple. The symbol of God's presence in the midst of his people had been turned into a smoking heap of ashes. Ruins everywhere. And the people themselves were dragged away from home and forced into captivity in Babylon.

Just shortly before this all happened Isaiah who had announced the end of his nation, had had this vision of the shoot out of the stump. Let me read it to you:

Isaiah 11:1- 9

**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.**
**7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.**
**8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.**
**9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.**

Expelled from their promised land, torn apart, many of their loved ones killed, others wounded and marked forever, they had only this song in their hearts. Looking at all that the Babylonians had done to them, they did wonder: Had God abandoned them? Could this terrible defeat possibly mean that the gods of the Babylonians were more powerful than their God and all his promises? Could it be that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Joseph had been weaker than other gods? These were dreadful thoughts to think in an awfully unknown future in a hostile land.

When the Jewish people arrived in Babylon they were deeply sorrowful and longed for revenge.

**1 By the rivers of Babylon –
there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered Zion.**

(...)

**4 How could we sing the LORD's song
in a foreign land?**

(...)

**7 Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, «Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!»**

**8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!**

**9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!**

...they were singing in Psalm 137.

But that wasn't as God meant it to be.

As time went on, and they began to live in the strange land, they found out that they could "sing their songs" to praise their God even far away from home. They found new ways of worship. They came to understand the truth of their prophets' messages – whether it was Isaiah out there with them, or whether it was Jeremiah back in the destroyed city of Jerusalem sending them letters, writing to them of a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

In the time being they grasped that the presence of God with them did not depend on physical securities like land, city or temple, but that the presence of God was embedded within their hearts – safe within them whatever the outward circumstances of their lives. That was the basis of their hope...

...nourished by verses as beautiful as Isaiah's.

Isaiah paints pictures of hope and peace beyond human possibilities; pictures expressing a vast part of our deepest wishes and desires:

A branch will grow out of a cut down stump, green in the desert, life after death. And in it all the spirit of God – no matter how barren the place!

Isaiah talks of righteousness, equality and faithfulness... of attention to the meek and poor, and an end of all evil.

A few chapters before he has even more in store for us: images of light in people's darkness, images of the yoke of the enslaved being broken, chains torn off, weapons turned into plough shares, stamping boots and soldier's uniforms destroyed forever, no more tears – but peace eternal.

And if all these were not powerful and promising enough, he tops them in the second half of the sermon text with enchanting images of: the wolf playing with the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, cow and bear, child and serpent, lion and ox... They all – natural enemies, if you like – shall live together in peace and share their space and their food.

None of them will hurt the other, because God has the say “on his holy mountain”.

Where they all live, where we all live, is the realm of God, and therefore it is filled with peace. What a wonderful world!

In the lives of people shall be as much of God’s spirit, wisdom, love and grace (and more) as waters cover the seas... in ancient times this was an expression of an endless resource that appears in nature and will never stop.

The human being who leads all these diverse creatures to live together peacefully is: a little child (v 6b).

A child...

small

helpless

powerless

fragile

vulnerable...

The person who brings about peace and hope, the guarantee for a future for humankind, the saviour, the redeemer, the liberator is: a child.

(“Let the children come to me, do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs...”)

The peacemaker, the redeemer, the human being to make all things new and to bear the hope of the world is: a child.

And here we are touching on this first Sunday in Advent the Christmas story, aren’t we...

In its fullness the human being Isaiah dreams of is revealed in Jesus, whose birth we celebrate in these days and weeks.

Jesus renewed God’s promise to be with his people, to be with us. He sealed that promise with his whole life and with his death. And he reassures us that...

...whenever we feel overwhelmed by desolation or despair, whenever we feel that the future is hopeless, we can remember Isaiah’s verses. ...and remember above all that we are held in love that nothing can break, and that there is always a glimpse of hope – may it be ever so tiny.

At this point we could probably come to an end.

But what about Joel’s baptism earlier on in the service?

A sentence comes to my mind; I cannot remember where I have read it: “Every small child is a sign of God that he (or she) has not yet given up this earth!”

Talking about hope in Advent, claiming that there is hope for the world, and baptising a child means today:

“Joel is a sign of God that God has not yet given up this earth...”, but is planning for us a future with hope.

And if you think of the many children baptised here at Peace Church in the past year – or the past years – this place must literally be filled to overflowing with hope: the hope that even from a dead stump a fragile green shoot can grow.

This vision of Isaiah’s kept innumerable Jewish people alive. It helped them withstand the inhumane conditions of their exile. It helped people through

millennia and centuries to survive times of alienation and exile. And it can help us in our times of exile.

Some of you I know well enough to probably name some situations of exile. Some I can assume, some I have no idea of. But mine I know for sure.

And we all have them at times:

a pain deep inside that we have no words for...

an overwhelming fear of what lies ahead...

and in my case the utter devastation at the sight of the changes in my life in the last few months...

Exile...

Here, too, is Isaiah with his songs and verses, sharing with us his most precious dreams, asking us to dream them, too. And we are asked to respond to them.

We can believe this prophet of hope. Dream his dreams, and help them come true.

There was this song on the radio the other night when I drove back from visiting Nicolas in hospital:

Visions that can change the world

trapped inside an ordinary girl.

She looks just like me too afraid to dream out loud...

You need courage now

if you're gonna persevere...

So don't be afraid to face the world against all odds.

CHORUS

Keep the dream alive don't let it die.

If something deep inside keeps inspiring you to try, don't stop.

And never give up, don't ever give up on you.

Don't give up!

And my prayer today is:

Loving God,

I will seek peace at heart

try to overcome my fears

and in my seeking

I will live with hope

strive for change

act with humility and faith

and choose courage not despair.

Amen.

Let us pray:

God, our lives are constantly changing. Often we feel numb and unbelieving, stunned and alarmed. Often it does not seem possible that our life could be so quickly turned upside down. Comfort us, we ask, wait with us while we try to grasp the truth. Slowly reveal to us what we need to accept.

And in this time of Advent keep us safe in the shelter of your love...

embrace us, hold us, lead us. Amen.