

## ***Full of the Knowledge of God***

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 4, 2022 – Morning Worship with Communion on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Text: Isaiah 11:1-4a;6-9

Peace. Such a loaded word when it should be such a simple one. Peace. The focal point of this second Sunday of Advent in 2022 during which we are attempting to “Celebrate the Simple” as our goal for our Advent and Christmastide experiences this year. On the surface this seems like two concepts – peace and simplicity – which would dovetail nicely. Makes sense in that one would expect that keeping life simple would necessarily keep life peaceful also. But, as we know all too well, real life seldom cooperates with our attempts to keep things simple or peaceful. In fact, I’m betting most of you actually get anxious if it seems like life is going smoothly, simply, peacefully. Admit it – when you have a day when everything goes exactly as you hoped it would with no problems, issues, unexpected catastrophes – you start getting worried. You immediately slip into a state of wariness, convinced something *has* to go wrong at any minute. So, with hardly a second thought, our desire to relax into the peace life affords us, however briefly, disappears. Worse, we seldom are cognizant of its departure. This itself is odd given that the yearning for peace in our lives, peace in our hearts, peace in our families and peace in the world is indelibly etched on our hearts. At the very same time we feel it’s not really possible to achieve, we still crave it. The more distant a pipe dream it seems to be, the more we long to figure out how to make it happen. And yet, asked to explain it to someone else, we struggle to come up with the words to describe this thing we long for.

I confess I really love Isaiah’s description of peace in the text we read this morning. He begins with the description of the leader who will bring this peace into being for the people: “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.” And, Isaiah explains, of all of these qualities it is the fear of the Lord that is most important. This whole notion of the fear of the Lord is confusing to us because we think, how can we love God if we are supposed to be afraid of God. Isn’t that what fear of the Lord means – being afraid of God? Actually, despite what it sounds like, that is not what it means to possess the fear of the Lord. The fear of the Lord refers to having a profound sense of awe and reverence when contemplating God. In other words, someone who possesses the fear of the Lord is someone who truly understands to the core of their being who God is and that God’s own self defies quantifiable description. As we talked about last week, the God of Isaiah is the God whose name is I AM WHO I AM. This God is the essence of the universe itself. When you think about it, that way – as having the ability to comprehend the infiniteness of God – the whole notion of possessing “the fear of the Lord” makes more sense.

But Isaiah doesn’t stop here. He continues on describing this leader and all of their attributes. This leader will not make superficial judgements. Justice for the poor and the meek shall be meted out with equity. Now that does sound like Jesus, which is why this text is used by Christians during Advent as one of the prophecy texts anticipating Jesus’ birth. The next phrase though does not sound like Jesus – “he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” Nope. Killing does not sound like Jesus at all. And yet Isaiah’s imagined leader will have these skills, exercising them with righteousness and faithfulness. That sounds more like a king, David or maybe Solomon. That, by the way, is precisely Isaiah’s intent with this text. He was speaking to the people at a time when their nation was in total upheaval. Defeat by the Babylonians had already happened. Their entire way of life was threatened, and here is Isaiah telling them a new leader will come and restore them to peace and the life they’ve lost and so want to reclaim

again. In this text Isaiah is literally speaking peace into a people terrified they would never know peace again.

I think this is why this text so resonates with us and has for all Christians for thousands of years. Peace is something we long for yet seldom achieve. And even when we do have peace, or something like it in our lives, it always, always proves to be ephemeral. It never lasts. This is why when we hear these powerful promises of Isaiah during Advent each year, we do so with longing in our hearts that maybe this is the year peace will finally become more of a realistic possibility. Maybe not immediately. Maybe not even in our lifetimes. But peace is still possible, Isaiah promises, and this is a promise we need to be true. We need to believe that a better, a more peaceful life is on its way to becoming reality. We need to trust that a simpler way of getting through each day is within our grasp, or at least the grasp of our children and grandchildren.

The final section of this text is probably the most well known part of it. At least part of this is due to the fact that a famous American painting is inspired by this very text. The artist is Edward Hicks and the most well-known of his paintings, entitled *The Peaceable Kingdom*, was created in 1834. Hicks was a Quaker preacher, an oxymoron in some ways, but his primary source of income was through his painting skills. *Peaceable Kingdom* was actually a series of paintings he did between 1820 and his death in 1849.

“The theme of this painting, drawn from chapter 11 of Isaiah, was undoubtedly attractive to Hicks and fellow Quakers not only for its appealing imagery but also for its message of peace: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and fating together; and a little child shall lead them.”<sup>1</sup>

Thanks to Hicks, we have a better sense of the extraordinary imagery Isaiah uses to describe what God’s peace would look like. Hicks even extends the peace described by Isaiah into his present day by including William Penn’s treaty with the Native Americans in the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.wikiart.org/en/edward-hicks/peaceable-kingdom-1834>

background. Unfortunately, we know that agreements with Native Americans never really led to peace. Quite the opposite in fact. And this simple reality – of the true elusiveness of peace, no matter what we might want to think or believe to the contrary – is what this text from Isaiah is asking us to consider more deeply. We can see this invitation in verse 9 of the text: “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” he begins. Okay, that sounds like peace. No hurting. No destroying. So far, we get it.

Then Isaiah mucks it all up with his next phraseology: “For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” Now what does *that* mean, we think. Actually, pretty much what it says. There will be no war, no hurting, no destroying because all the people – the very people God created in the first place – will finally understand what it is God has been trying to teach them, trying to love into them for thousands of years. Isaiah is saying here that humans will stop fighting because they will finally have grasped and understood all that God has been trying to teach them about loving God and loving the other. Humans will finally get it. And this knowledge of the Lord is what will cause them to lay down their weapons at last, put aside all their anger at last, and pick up whatever is needed to make life peaceful for everyone instead. When this happens, Isaiah says, when humans finally get this, when they finally accept the knowledge of the Lord that God has been offering to them since the moment of Creation, then peace will reign. No more war. No more hate. No more selfishness. No more starving, homeless people running away from battles they didn’t start and problems they didn’t create. All that will be over. This is Isaiah’s promise in this text, that once we wrap our heads around the knowledge of God and bring it into the core of who we are, peace becomes reality.

Well, sounds simple. Yet we all know it’s anything but. Humans are notoriously short-sighted, quick to forget about God and what God expects of us, convinced that they “know better.” Just in my lifetime

alone, I have been touched by more wars and pseudo wars than it seems should be possible. I was born into the post WWII years when the US was already involved in the Korean War. Next it was Vietnam. I lost friends in that war. Throughout all of this, the Cold War threatened extinction. The Gulf War touched my ministry career when the church where I was serving at the time hosted the funeral for the first casualty of that war, a Blackhawk Helicopter pilot. I watched the Middle East explode, literally and figuratively, after 9/11. And now here we are watching helplessly from the sidelines as Russia tries to obliterate Ukraine for having the audacity to be its own country. Peace literally has not existed during my lifetime so why the heck is Isaiah promising it can still happen? If human history is any indication – and it's the only thing we have to go on – humans are just not capable of peace.

And when we're talking about peace, it's not just the absence of war we're talking about. If only! The history of this country has never been a trajectory of peace. Our country was born in a war and has survived through several more wars right here in our short 246 year existence: The Revolutionary War, the War of 1812, the Civil War, and the American Indian Wars to name just a few. And we can't forget the other conflicts which so dominate our landscape these days: racism, sexism, ageism, able-ism and most recently, the attacks on the LGBTQIA+ community and now our Jewish brothers and sisters. Senseless mass shootings have us all on edge even though we just don't think about it because if we did, we'd never go anywhere. Dear ones, our lives are anything but peaceful! And yet it is peace we crave. It is peace Isaiah promises. So, where do we go from here? How do we wrap our heads around the dissonance created by Isaiah's promise that peace is possible and the reality of the violent speech and actions we are confronted by every day? Here is another opportunity to celebrate the simple this Advent season. Let me explain.

I am remembering one of the war protest songs popular during the Vietnam War era. Some of you of a certain age may remember it. More of a chant, really, it's words still ring true: "All we are saying is give peace a chance." Just give it a chance. This, dear ones, is what I think Isaiah's beautiful description of the peace filled world God wants for us comes down to. Isaiah is urging us to give peace a chance. And he tells us how to begin the process – by seeking after and pursuing the knowledge of God and what God has always wanted for his beloved Creation. In other words, we give peace a chance by learning what God has to say about it. We give peace a chance when we really work at loving God with all that we have and all that we are. We give peace a chance when we go out of our way, maybe even out of our comfort zones, to do for others what we would have done for us. Feed the hungry. House the homeless. Advocate for a health care system that cares for all equitably. Take care of the elderly and infirm. Educate the children. Stand up for marginalized communities that are being attacked more and more openly each day.

Dear Ones, more and more in the news each day we see ever increasing threats against the LGBTQIA+ community. There is an article in today's Boston *Globe* describing the horrific threats doctors and staff at Boston Children's Hospital receive daily because of their gender affirming care for trans kids and others struggling to figure out who they are. As if this weren't bad enough, antisemitism is flagrantly being advocated like it hasn't been in recent memory. It is flaunted openly by celebrities like Ye, the rapper formerly known as Kanye West. It's getting worse because Elon Musk, the new owner of Twitter, thinks everyone has a right to say what they think and damn the consequences. Worse even than this is the complete silence on the part of too many influential leaders on the Right in this country. Dear ones, despite what we may want to believe, antisemitism is alive and well in this country in 2022. Let me assure you, it is reawakening nightmare memories among our Jewish brothers and sisters. And let

us never forget, Isaiah's words we read this morning were written first to the Jewish people. The promise of peace was made to the Jews and how elusive it has been for them. We Christians appropriated Isaiah's promise of peace to ourselves as we see in texts just like today's the prophecy Jesus fulfilled. Layered on to that is the reality that for literally millennia Christians have unjustly and erroneously blamed Jews for murdering Christ. Thus, they want to believe their hatred of Jews is justified. It is not. Not now, not ever.

Dear ones, as I think about all this, I know God is weeping in the heavens. And it is up to us to dry God's tears. We must confront hate speech, harassment and threatened violence against these marginalized people whenever we hear it. We must call it out, even when it is friends or colleagues or even family who speak it. We must be willing to confront whatever it is that threatens God vision of peace for us all. Otherwise, dear ones, peace will remain forever beyond our reach. The fullness of the knowledge of God must be allowed to permeate our beings so much that threats against anyone become not only wrong, but entirely unacceptable – something which provokes us to anger, and action instead of the all too human response of looking the other way because we don't want to “ruffle any feathers” or “spoil the moment” or whatever euphemism we fall back on in these moments of denial.

All this sounds impossible and even scary, I know. In world where peace is so lacking, how can anything we might do make a difference? That's where God comes into the equation. That's where Christmas miracles come into play. We give peace a chance one moment at a time. One person at a time. One step at a time. We strive to possess the knowledge of God and trust it can change everything. Even us. And here's the thing – it will. Amen.