

A Sermon by Alex Evans
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA
From Sunday, October 7, 2007

Texts: **Isaiah 11:1-9; Matthew 5:9**

*You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. **Matt 5:9***

“Getting From Here to There”

Our Old Testament passage today from Isaiah is usually read during Advent – in those weeks before Christmas. It is a passage of promise – in fact – the Messianic promise when we look forward to the coming of God's great reign in Jesus Christ.

The context for these lines from Isaiah is actually failure – the failure of the kings to create a holy people, the failure of the world to emerge as a place of peace. What happened to the kings in the Biblical story? Well, while some were quite capable in leadership, many were corrupt and selfish; and the kingdom of God's people was taken off to exile. What happened to the society – the one that God was hoping to establish as a place of peace and harmony and hope? Well, they kept on fighting, and going the wrong direction, and God's promised reign was not coming about. This story can be found in so many of the pages in the Old Testament: God attempts to shape and form a people, a community of peace and hope; yet people disappoint, and wars continue, and injustice and inhumanity are pervasive themes.

But the Isaiah text offers promise even in the failure: a shoot (which is fresh growth) shall come forth from the stump (a terminated plant from which nothing can grow). By God's grace and mercy, new life is going to emerge out of the tragedy and loss of the old. God will not give up on God's people. And what will God accomplish out of the rubble, out of the injustice, out of the wars and confusion and lostness? Well, there is a vivid picture of God's reign, God's promise: the wolf will lie down with the lamb. “They will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea.”

This is what God's people have always looked for, worked for, and prayed for – the fullness of God's reign, ‘Thy Kingdom come,’ a world of peace and joy, light and love that covers the earth.

So, how do we get from here to there? That continues to be our challenge and our calling as God's people. How do we get from where we are - the violence and hatred that we know (and have known for so long!) – to the hope and harmony that God intends for us and for the world?

One of you passed along to me a cartoon from the newspaper this week. It comes from the comic strip, *Agnes*. Two characters are lying in the hillside staring up at the sky. One says to the other: “If you look at that cloud just right, it's a big face ... sort of like God smiling down at us.” The other guy looks at the cloud and says, “Looks more like a smirk to me.” Both of them continue to stare at the clouds. Then the second one says, “at least we agree that God appears to be amused.”

It is easy to wonder if God is smiling on us and the world. It is easy to wonder if God might be smirking. It is easy to conclude that God just might not be too pleased with much of what is going on in the world.

So how do we get from here to there?

In the Jewish tradition, there is a phrase that attempts to summarize how we get from here to there. The Hebrew words are *tikkun olam* – and those words mean *mending or perfecting the world*. The idea is that we get from here to there – to that place where there is no more hurt or destruction, and the earth is full of the knowledge of God – as we each seek to live out *tikkun olam*, as we each offer our lives to the mending of the world.

For sure, this is God's world. God brings the redemption of the world. God brings the promised Messiah. God brings God's kingdom, God's fullness. It will come about, in God's time and with God's grace, and the wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the kid. That comes about because of God! That is God's promise.

But God is also always using us to bring about, to facilitate, to promote that reign. And each of us, just as Jesus urges us, can do our part, can love from the center of who we are. Each of us can show mercy, forgive, be peacemakers. Each of us is called to mend the world with the way we live. Our lives are not accidents. Our lives have a specific purpose. We have gifts and opportunities to make a positive difference in the world. As we each realize and affirm this, our world will move closer toward God's promised reign.

Surely you have heard the famous story of Loren Eisely, the well-known anthropologist: An old man was walking down the beach when he noticed a young girl picking up starfish stranded by the retreating tide, and throwing them back into the sea one by one. The man asked the girl what she was doing. She said that the starfish would die if left exposed to the morning sun. "But the beach goes on for miles. They are so many starfish stranded by the tide. How can your effort make any difference?" The little girl looked up to the man and said, "To THIS one; it makes a difference."

That is the idea of *tikkun olam*. We know we cannot redeem the whole world. That is God's job. But each of us has gifts and opportunities to do our part, to mend the world where we can – one act at a time, one person at a time, one day at a time. Each and every act of kindness, or care, of help, of mercy mends a fracture of the world. The way from here to there takes time. It is dependent finally on God's abiding faithfulness and steadfast love. There are setbacks along the way: sins, wars, selfishness, pain and more. But each of us is called to give ourselves to mending, to working for peace and light always. Save a life and you begin to save the world. Change a life and you begin to change the world. And as long as there is hunger, poverty, treatable disease in the world, there is work for each of us to do. As long as nations fight, and people hate, and corruption stalks the halls of power; as long as there is unemployment and homelessness, depression and despair, our task as God's people is not yet done. God keeps calling us, individually and together, to work for God's promised and coming reign. God keeps asking, just as he asked the first humans in the garden, "where are you?" God keeps saying "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family." (see J. Sacks, To Heal a Fractured World, p. 72 & 77 & 82)

Daniel Pearl is a name that is increasingly familiar around the world. He was a journalist, a foreign correspondent working for the Wall Street Journal. Daniel Pearl had a pretty charmed life – born in Princeton, NJ where his father was a distinguished computer scientist – he excelled in literature, sports and music; he had earned quite an international reputation for his writing. He was also one who trusted people. Incapable of malice himself, he never expected it of others either. But this trust got him into trouble. While he was covering a story in Karachi, Pakistan, he was kidnapped and murdered in the most gruesome way. There is a new movie out about Daniel’s life, his death, and his wife’s ordeal following his death.

What people know much less about is Daniel Pearl’s father, Judea. Judea started a foundation in Daniel’s memory. It is a foundation for reconciliation. And among the projects that the foundation sponsors is a fund for young Pakistani journalists to come to the US to study, to experience western culture, to gain insights about the world, to lessen their sense of alienation. The foundation also organizes concerts around the globe, using music, another of Daniel’s gifts, to bring people together. But Judea also wanted to go further, to engage the Islamic world and the people who harbored Daniel’s killers. In recent years, Judea and his foundation have made great strides in bringing together Muslims, Jews, and Christians, people from east and west, north and south, for understanding, mutual encouragement, forgiveness, and hope. Judea Pearl is one of many who is working hard to forge peace and hope out of the current context of violence, terror, and alienation. When Judea was asked what motivates him to work so hard, to put up with so much, to persevere at reconciliation, he is blunt and direct: “If I were to fight hate with hate, I would only create more hate. Therefore, I fight hate with love. This is my tribute to Daniel’s memory.” (see J. Sacks, p. 210)

Friends, we can never know what might unfold in our lives, in our town, in our world. But one thing is always for sure – we will each be given many opportunities for the mending of the world – for moments both big and small when we can do our part to heal the fractures. One thing is certain, we will have moments where what we do matters very much. It is in those moments when what we believe is put to the test. It is in those moments when what we do begins to transform the landscapes of human possibility. It is in those moments that our words, our deeds heal some of the wounds of the fractured world in which we live. Jesus says, *You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.*

God promises that the hurt and destruction will be ended. That hurt and destruction is something we know so much about in this town. God promises that the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. We long for that so much. We cannot sit around and wait for it. We are called to be servants of God. We cannot mostly talk about it – our world is so much in need of healing and peace. We are agents for healing and peace.

Folks, let us keep at it. Let us keep at this idea of *tikkun olam* – of mending the world, of getting from here to there. Even when we are weak, a Strength beyond our strength has pulled us through at least this far. Foolish and floundering as we are, a Wisdom beyond our wisdom has flickered up just enough to light a path for us. Faint of heart as we are, a Love beyond our power to love has kept us moving forward. (see F. Buechner, A Room Called Remember, p. 7)

So let us gather at this table with people from east and west, north and south, and discover our unity and wholeness and hope in Jesus Christ. And let us leave this place committed afresh to promoting Christ's peace and light, love and hope today and forever. Alleluia. Amen

Prayer: With your grand love and care, O God, we commit our lives again to loving and serving and following Jesus Christ, to mend the world, and to promote peace and light. Guide us that way. Amen

This sermon was preached as part of regular morning worship at Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, Blacksburg, VA on Sunday, October 7, 2007 by Alex Evans, Pastor. This is a rough manuscript.