

Peace Be With You
A sermon by David Roquemore
First Presbyterian Church, Newton NC
November 27, 2022
First Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 2: 1-5

It's Advent. It's the first Sunday of the church year. Happy New Year! It's Advent. Advent means simply, "coming." He is coming — into our world, into our lives, into our hearts, into our nation. He comes and everything changes. He is always coming, and so we wait and wonder.

Now for many people today marks the beginning of the "Christmas season." We hear carols and see programs put on by school children. This continues through about the evening of December 26, when we are told to put away all of this and get ready for real season of discount sales and pro football. College bowl games. But the truth is, the church keeps Advent and only moves into Christmas slowly. We keep the feast of Christmas going until January 6. Twelve days!

Advent is a time of tension. To wait for the Lord is to wait with joy. We are glad that at last he is coming. It is also to wait with some anxiety, for any time the Lord comes is sure to a threatening time. God's holiness and justice make us aware of our shortcomings, regardless of how merciful we know that he is. We wait, then, in anxious joy or perhaps joyous anxiety, and we wonder what it is we can do while we wait.

Isaiah calls us to peace.

This passage contains the verse beloved by peaceniks. "They shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." Back in the early 80s, when President Reagan used to provoke the Russians every chance he got, the peace movement was very urgent: we have to get rid of all these nukes before someone pushes the button; back then, this was a popular verse.

Peace means that the fighting is over. Peace means that the sin is forgiven and guilt eliminated. Peace means the punishment is finished and mercy prevails. When God comes, this will come to pass. And so we prepare our hearts and lives for his coming.

The first place we look for peace is in our hearts and lives. Peace means living in a relation to God that is healthy, free from guilt; it respects the majesty of God and seeks to do God's will. This all involves forgiveness, which comes freely from God. It also involves repentance, which is an earnest and honest effort, even if unsuccessful, to change our lives. It involves forgiving ourselves. But punishing ourselves over something that cannot be changed serves no purpose at all. When we let go of a thing and forgive ourselves, we allow God to deal with it. At times the mistakes of the past can be used to bless us in the future, if we allow God to work there.

The second place we look for peace is with our neighbors — you know, those strange people who live across the fence. Here's the thing: Jesus died for them too. And so remembering the grace and mercy God has shown us, we treat them with respect, love, and mercy. We let the peace in our hearts reach out and reign in our relationships. What places in your neighborhood need help? In our families, in the actual neighborhood, on the job, even here in the church — anywhere we go there are bound to be relationships that need peace.

And this is hard! Most often people simply pretend nothing ever happened. There is no peace, but there is the appearance of peace. People just go on about their lives and business and never mention the thing that needs to be resolved. That isn't real peace!

Other times someone comes up to you — and this has happened to me — and says, “you upset me but I have forgiven you!” They use forgiveness as a kind of weapon. Very passive aggressive, don't you think? That doesn't make for peace.

Our neighbors are not just the people lucky enough to live near us. Neighbors are anyone who shares our humanity. And so our peaceful lives reach out to anyone and everyone who lives in the communities of which we are members, and the larger community of our nation. Peace involves politics — how we live together in the *polis*, the city. People say that the church should not be involved in politics — but how can we help it? The Bible is a political book through and through. I think people really mean, the church ought not be involved in politics that I disagree with. But faithfulness to our calling means we cannot make the gospel of Jesus Christ only a personal and private matter. That is a distortion of the truth.

It is easy to become partisan. I remember back in seminary some of us were joking about those Russians, you know — our enemies. One woman said in somewhat shocked tones that she prayed for the Russians every night. How can we make peace if we don't do that? She asked.

What we have to do is respect the rights and affirm the humanity of all people, even those with whom we disagree, even our enemies. We don't have to agree, or even like each other, but we can work together and get along with each other. The first step is seeing that we are all equal before God. Rudolf Bultmann famously said, the ground at the foot of the cross is level. So the enemies are also my neighbors, and perhaps we can do something more positive than trying to kill them!

We don't have a lot of power to change the world, as individuals. Right? We live in a system that is complex and out of our control. But when we talk about changing the system, we are told one of two things. The first thing we are told is, leave it to the experts; you are just being naive. Maybe so, but then, Jesus was naive too. He never bowed to the wisdom of this world. He always had some naively radical paradoxical impossible approach to things. Maybe that is our calling too?

Or the second response is, well there is nothing we can do, the world is headed for its own destruction, and we can't change it. But we can't just give up. We are called to

make for peace in a world of war and fighting. We are called to do this, and we must answer our calling.

I think there is something we can do to bring peace and prepare for Christ to come. It sounds naive, even radical: we can pray. We can pray for peace. We pray all the time when we have needs: help me Lord! We can pray for our neighbors, near and far, for the ones we like, and the ones with whom we disagree. We can even pray for those we hate. That is the way to begin bringing peace to the world.

Someone asked me once, what if we prayed instead of complaining every time something doesn't work, or doesn't go our way? Now sometimes a good gripe can make your day, but when something is important, when it needs to be changed — well, would you rather fret and complain, or pray that it will be changed? My friend had a poster that said, "Lighting a candle is good, but it is more fun to curse the darkness." Indeed it is, and some of us just can't seem to get the candle lit.

But God will. God will bring peace, with all of us, between all of us. We will all live in God's perfect kingdom, in a place that Revelation describes as beautiful, where there are no lamps because God himself is the light. And we will walk in the light of the Lord.

In that day, in that realm, there will be perfect peace — between people, between us and God, between all of us. And we shall live in that light in the happiness and joy of Christ's perfect peace.

Thanks be to God. Amen.