

Peace Can't Wait

Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12

Living God, let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Growing up in the Boy Scouts, there is one particular hiking trip I'll never forget. We were making great time one day in our plans to hike about 15 miles, so we decided to press on and take a longer loop to our goal. We'd add an extra 5 miles and make it an impressive 20 mile day! So we pressed on into the fading sun, and soon realized we'd made a mistake. Our map said we should have come to a trail that would lead us down the ridge to our goal, but we never saw it. Hiking on and on we amassed a total of 25 miles before the darkness of night set in and we realized we were lost. After backtracking, we fanned out through the woods where we thought the trail should be, each searching for a sign of the way that would lead us home. As I searched my section of the woods, quite alone in the suffocating darkness, I heard a loud and distinctive RATTLE next to my left boot. Looking down, I saw a massive Timber Rattlesnake, filling the forest with its dire warning and coiling to strike. Frankly I didn't care if the trail was that way, I ran!

Coming face to face with the great serpent in the woods that night was the most lost I'd ever felt. I knew unequivocally that I was not where I was meant to be, and it was time to turn around. Perhaps we need to face our serpents before we can realize how lost we are.

In this way, we can bring some gratitude to our hearing of John the Baptist and his harsh words. In today's gospel, John brings us face to face with our serpents. Not having found success as a Christmas Card writer for Hallmark, John greets the religious leaders who come to be baptized by saying, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance." Wait, did John just call them VIPERS? Let's unpack that, shall we?

Think about what we know biblically about Vipers. Does this sound like a compliment? No! Where do we first hear of Vipers/Serpents of any kind? That's right! Genesis! John is pointing this crowd—most of whom would either be Jewish or familiar enough with Judaism to get to point—back to the Garden of Eden and the sinfulness of humanity. Brood of vipers means that John is calling this crowd descendants of Sin... family of Sin... slaves to sin.

Yikes... Didn't we just begin our service today by confessing our own sin? So that must mean... WE might have some viper-ish tendencies too. Ok John... You've got our attention now.

And well he should have our attention. John is calling those who gather to receive the gift of baptism to repent, noting that the Kingdom of God has come near. If we are going to live out the way of God's Kingdom, if we are going to embrace our lives as baptized believers, if we are to live faithfully in this Advent season of expectant hope for God's promised way of peace... then we must first embrace this call to repentance. We must confront our own serpents found in the lost night of our souls.

John is proclaiming a way of God's peace—true peace—that names our failures, repents from our ways of pain, and ushers in a way of peace that is impossible for us to create on our own. This is not peace as the world Gives, but peace as God gives. God's peace is proclaimed in Isaiah 11 that we heard today. Bears pass up steak dinner to graze, children play with poisonous snakes, and lions and lambs rest together. This sounds like hyperbole, and to humans it is. But to God, this way where even those mired in the most fundamental disagreements, those divided by the most profound systems of fear, and those who feel unworthy of this way of peace are all drawn in to God's vision of abundant mercy. This is not something we can create without God, because as history shows, we've tried and failed. Alone, we humans only create illusory peace.

We will see this illusory peace in just a few short weeks, when we gather here for worship on Christmas Eve. Worship will begin with the Triumphant "Christmas Proclamation". It says *"in the one hundred and ninety-fourth Olympiad; the seven hundred and fifty-second year from the foundation of the city of Rome; the forty-second year of the reign of Octavian Augustus; **while the whole world enjoyed a span of peace,** Jesus Christ, eternal God and Son of the eternal Father, desiring to sanctify the world by his most merciful coming, being conceived by the Holy Spirit and nine months of growth in the womb of his mother— now in our own times is the nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, God made flesh."*

While the whole world enjoyed a span of peace? In Advent, we wait in expectant hope that God's way of peace will be made known here on earth. We pray that Christ will come to bring this peace among us. So why would Christ come to us when the "whole world enjoyed a span of peace"?

This period in time was known as the Pax Romana, or the Great Roman Peace, and it spanned the period from 27 years before the birth of Christ, to the year 180 CE. This era was marked by a time without open warfare between the territories of the Roman Empire. But if we remember this period of history, we know that Christ was crucified during this "peace"... The Temple in Jerusalem was burned to the ground by the Romans in the year 66 CE during this "peace"... Jesus in his ministry reminds his followers to take up their cross and follow him, reminding us that the use of mass crucifixion was a known tool of Rome to maintain this "peace"...

Even under the slightest scrutiny, we see the deep flaws in Rome's great "peace". It was illusory peace—peace rooted in violence, oppression, and submission. In fact it's not peace... it's just a time of fear. It was not the peace of which we hear in Isaiah 11 where the child plays with the serpent and the lion lays with the lamb. It's not God's peace.

How often do we try to create this piece, dear church? Peace that isn't really peace, but fear of confronting our own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the systems around us. We prefer instead to say, "No! Let's not talk about it! We have "peace" now..." It's Fear, not peace. John the Baptist calls us to look the serpents of fear that masquerade as peace dead in the eye, turn from them, and walk in the way of the Lord.

And God can't wait for us to create this peace by ourselves. In Christ, God has said, "Peace Can't Wait." Christ has come to show us a way of salvation, mercy, redemption, and community that reveals God's peace here and now. As we root our lives in the promises of God, and receive God's abundant grace for which we've done nothing to deserve it, we will begin to see glimpses of this peace. We'll see this peace in the holy relationships we form, in the community we build. We'll see peace playfully splash in the waters of eternal life as Esme is born to new life through the waters of baptism this morning [at 11:00.] We'll see a glimpse of peace as we gather around the table to share the feast of salvation once more with the saints who rest in God's eternal peace. Again and again, God breaks in to our lives with means of grace that restore us in God's vision of peace, allowing us to see this way here and now. Again and again God names us and claims us as God's own children of peace. God has shown us time and time again that *PEACE CAN'T WAIT*.

But if God can't wait to share peace with us, then we know *REPENTANCE CAN'T WAIT* either. We can't put this important and faithful work on hold. We're not building illusory peace here in Christ's church. We are called to be open to John's bold Challenge, and authentic in owning the ways we've failed to live out this way of peace. In this openness and authenticity, we will find the way of repentance—turning us back toward relationship with God.

We must face our serpents with honesty, acknowledging the ways we've harmed, hated, and excluded one another. All the while, even more important than John's faithful work of pointing us toward our serpents, John points us toward Christ, who is already rushing to embrace us with mercy as we turn in true repentance. Christ is already ushering in *his* promised peace as we deconstruct the illusory peace of our world.

Many things in the midst of this busy season *can*, in fact, wait. For the sake of our neighbors, for the sake of Christ's Church, our Repentance *Can't* Wait. God's Peace Can't Wait.

Amen.