

Benzonia Congregational UCC
December 5, 2010
Second Sunday of Advent (A)
Isaiah 11: 1 - 10
"Dare to Hope"
Dan Furman

Emmanuel,

God with us. We give you thanks that throughout history, even from the first light of creation or the darkness before the light, you have been with us. Remind us of your presence with us this day and this week as we continue our exploration, our journey through Advent toward Christmas morning. Be our shepherd, our starlight. We pray that the words that are spoken and the communion of our gathered thoughts, bring peace and glory to you, O God, for we believe that you are steadfast and transforming. Amen.

When I was a freshman in high school, my Dad, who worked at Grand Valley State University specifically in Public Broadcasting, had a convention he had to attend in San Francisco. Luckily for our family, we were able to go along with him and tour Northern California. While I have many memories from that trip, including the fact that we were thinking the warmth of sunny California extended **completely** throughout the entire state, and none of us brought any warm clothes at all, and were not so pleasantly surprised by the very cool breezes; one memory that I recall and that applies to our reading for this morning was our trip to Muir Woods.

Established in 1908, Muir Woods is a National Monument most famous for their collection of giant and majestic Redwood Trees. These massive trees, some of which had trunks that were so wide, a car could pass directly through, were amazing to behold. At one point on our tour, we walked past a section of a tree that had been cut, lifted, and set on its side,

showcasing its rings. Moving from the outside toward the center, small signs had been posted marking human history from the Civil War, to the start of our nation, to the battle of Hastings in 1066, even to the birth of Christ, and then, even a bit further. It did not seem possible. How could a single tree have spanned two millennia? How remarkable to wonder about all the previous generations and cultures that gave pause as they walked through those woods.

Though there were tourists, like us, playing like children around these giant trees, there was also a peaceful aspect, a silent recognition that we were on holy ground. We will return to these images in a bit.

This morning, we lit the second candle of the Advent wreath, meaning we are almost halfway on our journey toward Christmas, and with only 19 days of shopping left, this seems like a wonderful time to focus on our theme for the day which is peace.

With everything going on in our lives, school activities, work deadlines, balancing checkbooks, concerns about friends or family, grief, doubts, and stress, with all of these and other thoughts and feelings going on, we seek peace of mind, peace in our time, quiet relief from the noisy chaos around us. We seek stillness and silence, we seek a retreat from our hectic lives, and we find sanctuary here, on this snowy Sunday morning.

On almost any given Sunday, we experience barely more than a smidgeon of silence in worship. Most often in preparation for prayer. Though I've never timed it, it's probably in the neighborhood of five to ten seconds total. And that's about all we can normally stand before our minds wander from our focus, or a cough or a sneeze escapes, or a child squeals from their world into ours. In normal conversation, silence is often awkward, and one of feels the need to fill the gap with a comment or two about something or other, normally the weather. There's just

something about silence that is so powerful, we simply don't know how to handle it. It removes us from the world we create for ourselves.

Silence is reserved for the sacred or the special it seems. We take a moment of silence when we remember the sacrifices made by our fallen heroes or when we collectively reflect upon the news of a tragedy. When we see something unbelievably wonderful, we feel the need to stop talking, our breath is literally taken away in the presence of an ancient canyon, a fascinating artwork, or a Redwood forest.

In silent moments, we reach out to God. In peaceful times, we find new hope and new life. Each of us this morning made the decision to get up and come to church, (or for our church members who listen to the worship service on a CD in their homes, you chose to participate simply by pushing the play button and listening). Maybe it's because we need church. Maybe it's because it's habit. Maybe it's because we love coming here. Maybe it is because we are working our way through our grief. Maybe it's because of the Advent workshop, or communion, or the book study, or because something is missing in our lives. And so each of us this morning, made the choice to participate in the life of our church, seeking peace, sacred stillness, wonder, and hope. Seeking light in the darkness. Seeking familiar and smiling faces.

Jesus once answered a question from someone seeking peace, by saying the greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, mind, and spirit and our neighbors as we love ourselves. And to think if every one of us, worldwide, would love our God and our neighbor, how much more peaceful might the world be. And then we hear about a young man who was planning to explode a car bomb at a Christmas tree lighting ceremony in Portland, Oregon. Or we hear about North Korea's recent escalation of violence against the South, and we wonder, is it possible to think that peace is achievable? Do we dare to hope for peace in our lives?

The prophet Isaiah speaks to us this morning from thousands of years ago, when the Hebrew people had been suffering for years without peace, exiled from their homelands and families, torn apart by war. And in the distance, from the wilderness, came words of hope from the prophet. He spoke to them about the glory of the good old days when Israel was a united kingdom; when there were rulers who were strong like David, and wise like Solomon. He reminded them of their present tragedy by saying that the line of Jesse, the lineage of kings had been severed, that the family tree was now nothing but a stump in the ground, defeated, and left to rot.

But then, Isaiah, points to a new shoot that will grow once again from the old and dilapidated stump; that new life will come once again from this great line of kings; and that of this new branch, the spirit of the Lord will rest upon him, and he will have understanding, and knowledge, wisdom and might, reverence and judgment, righteousness and faithfulness. Isaiah speaks to his people who are scattered from each other, living in misery, and about to give up hope, and he prophesied to them the good news of a new king who would come to reunite them and rebuild their nation as well as their hopes and dreams for the future.

We too want to hope for the one who will reunite the world as we know it, to hope for the one who will end wars and reunite our families, who will love us equally even as we are different and believe different things. We too want to believe that someone will restore our faith, revitalize our mission, fill us with purpose and vision. But do we dare to hope, do we dare to let down our guard of dismay and our security blankets of believing that we are in control? Do we dare to recognize the loving one who will come to lead us once again?

And then Isaiah seems to recognize the looks of bleakness and despair on the faces of those around him, and he gives them an image to contemplate. Imagine, if you will, these

familiar words, "the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf and the lion, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... The nursing child shall play over the hole of a snake... and they will not hurt or destroy... for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord..."

We've heard some of this language before, but it is still odd to think about. If you can get past the image of wolves and lambs getting along, what's the deal with lions and oxen eating straw all about? Or children playing near snakes? But if we remember, the creation story in Genesis, chapter one, we remember that God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. ... **everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.**" (This, by the way, is the Gospel for vegetarians!)

So, on the one hand, Isaiah is suggesting a return to God's intention for creation, that lions would no longer eat meat, but would return to straw, and more so, that predators would lose their interest in feeding on their prey, instead choosing to live peaceably. It is both a remembrance of paradise and a hopeful image of looking forward to a land without violence and bloodshed, where the animal kingdom would take notice, even where children could play with no fear of harm.

But does this even sound feasible? We know that lions are carnivores. It's just a fact, it's normal. So can we allow ourselves to even hear Isaiah's call to no longer see violence as normal, more so, can we hear God's call, God's challenge to us that just as a new shoot would grow from a dead stump, that we too are called to see new life revitalize the weakened church? Do we dare to hope for an image of congregations recognized in the community for extending radical hospitality and extravagant welcome to all?

It is a testament to our inspiration from Scripture, that while we wait expectantly for Christmas to come, for a star to direct us, for a child to lead us, for ourselves to be ready, for visions of a new world, for peace in our time, for everyone to be welcomed to the table, to feel God's loving Spirit; while we wait with expectation for the normal to become abnormal, do we dare to try to enact peace with each other? Do we dare hope for new life in our local economy? Do we dare to hope that a child could lead us to a new vision of a peaceable kingdom? Do we dare to hope that just as we are not yet finished with who God has created us to be, that God is also not finished speaking to us and that God has something wonderful in store for us in the future?

Whether we are talking about a giant stump in Muir Woods, or a random felled tree in the woods nearby; whether we are talking about our church, or the United Church of Christ, or the state of the Christian church in our nation currently, a new shoot of life is about to grow from the stump, silently bridging the gap from our past to the wonders of the future. In this season of Advent, while we wait both for the Christ child to appear in our nativities and in our hearts, let us prepare for new life to grow within us to share with the world, taking steps toward peace of mind, peace in our time, and a realized calm and stillness in our ongoing search for the sacred. Amen.