

Plymouth Congregational Church of Fort Wayne, UCC
December 4, 2016

“The Gift of Glorious Vision”

“... the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal
to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him,
and his dwelling shall be glorious.”
Isaiah 11:10

PRELUDE

This morning I'd like to speak of
dreams and visions,
important consideration for Christians
any time of year,
yet especially compelling for
Christians watching and waiting
for Christmas.

There is a Proverb in our Old Testament scriptures:
**“Where there is no vision,
the people perish”** (Proverbs 29:18). That's
the King James translators speaking.

In Acts, when the Holy Spirit delivered
a lightning strike, Peter preached a sermon
using a text from the prophet Joel that
spoke of a day when the **“young shall see
visions, and the old dream dreams.”**

When many were suffering depression
in the 1930's, it was the Harlem poet,
Langston Hughes (1902-1967), who said:

**Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.**

**Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.**

Another verse from Langston Hughes:

**“Folks, I’m telling you,
Birthing is hard
and dying is mean
so get yourself some loving
in between.”**

Birthing is hard, dying is mean,
dream and visions are needed
for the in between,
in between what once was and
what will be.

What dreams dare we hold fast
watching and waiting for Christmas?
Something more than a “white” Christmas?

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The dream, the vision, the hope
for peace in our world
is deeply engrained in our Christian faith.
And often, hope is affixed to a child,
a child who might make of life
more than we - in our time -
have permitted.

When Zechariah held baby John (the Baptist),
in his arms, he spoke of what he, with hope,
saw coming: **“light to those who
sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace”**
(Luke 1:79).

When Jesus was but a week and day old,
Mary and Joseph took him to the temple
in Jerusalem, and there they encountered
old man Simeon, devout and said to be
looking forward - that hope - looking forward
to a better day; Simeon took the infant in his arms,
and he praised God, saying
**“Master, now you are dismissing your servant
in peace ... for my eyes have seen your salvation ...”**
(Luke 2:29-30).

When a choir of angels gave a midnight
concert for the Bethlehem shepherds
working the third shift, it was with song
glorifying God for the birth of the child
said to be bringing peace on earth.

That peace, proclaimed as hope
at the child's birth, is the peace Jesus
left as legacy
to the disciples who walked
according to his rule.

**“Peace I leave with you,
my peace I give to you,”**
we read in John's gospel (John 14:27).
Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid.

As a people, our yearning for peace,
our hopes and dreams of peace,
the peace we pray and cherish,
is deeply engrained in our faith,
and it is deeply embedded in our past,
not simply in our Christmas past,
but well before, in the dreams and
visions of the Hebrew prophets.

One such prophet is Isaiah who spoke a word we heard as our lesson this morning. Isaiah knew about having hope affixed to a child. We didn't hear it this morning but soon we will - for it was Isaiah who spoke, "**a child has been born for us,**" a child adorned with magnificent titles: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

What is interesting about Isaiah is that he held on to hope when hope was all he had to hold on to.

Bear with me. Let me explain.

First, we have a prophetic book named Isaiah, which we distinguish from Isaiah, the prophet, whose name is affixed to the book. The prophet Isaiah is in the book of Isaiah but the literature in the book expands beyond and builds upon the prophet, containing material that spreads over two or more centuries.

The prophet Isaiah had a long life. He was actively engaged in ministry over a period that spanned two score or more years in the 8th century BCE. He was well positioned to peddle influence, he counseled kings and princes. He was a seer, a man of visions, whose oracles were recorded and preserved.

In chapter 1:1 we read:

“the vision of Isaiah, son of Amoz ...
in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz,
and Hezekiah.”

We could liken this to vision in the days
of Carter, Reagan, daddy Bush,
Clinton, George W. Bush, Obama,
and Trump.

So Isaiah saw administrations come and go;
he was not simply an observer, he was
possibly a composer of material
used at coronation ceremonies;
voicing the ideals - the hopes and dreams -
much desired when a change was occurring.
I want to be clear here: Isaiah was writing
in his time for his time. And his time has
relevance for our own.

When we read from Isaiah 11, we are invited
to consider the office of the king having
fallen from grace. The reference to Jesse
is David's throne, which in Isaiah's day was
but a stump. The golden age of the great
king has turned into nightmare. In reading
through Isaiah, it is easy to find the cause of fault.

Lots of prayers being prayed; but no practice,
with God, according to Isaiah, having grown
tired of listening.

Solutions were laid out, courtesy of Isaiah,
**“cease to do evil; learn to do good;
seek justice; rescue the oppressed,
defend the orphan; plead for the widow.”**

This is a common refrain of complaint
registered by prophets like Isaiah,
people in position of power take care
of themselves, but they neglect to provide

hope and resources for vulnerable people
who lack hope and resources.

It is more than neglect.
People prey upon people.
The strong grind and crush the weak.
Predators and prey clash within
a system that exerts no restraint
upon the former, no protection for the latter.

It is quite a mess – and made messier when
religion sanctions the people who are
corrupting the system.

God is not faulted, not blamed for the world
the way it is; according to Isaiah the people
“**have brought evil on themselves**” (Isaiah 3:9).

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What is remarkable about the reading from
Isaiah, the “**shoot that shall come**” to lead
and guide, to rule and govern, will be aligned
with divine desire for all people.

It is a glorious vision,
not just for Jews,
not just for Jerusalem,
not just for Israel,
not just for Christians.

Isaiah’s vision is far more inclusive;
not just some, but all;
not just for the humans,
but for all creatures,
 the great, the small,
 predators and prey.

It is a vision in which the youngest
are lifted up, not marginalized,

not neglected but
rather placed front and center,
and they are safe, at peace,
within a balanced creation.

Are we living with hope?
Are we living with such vision?
Are we living with vision that includes
the lion and lamb,
the cow and bear and child
relating in a way so as to not hurt or destroy?

It is a grand and glorious vision.
It is Isaiah's gift.
Are we situated to receive it?
Or are we on a pause,
overdosed on disappointment,
undone with sorrow/sadness?

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I'm been thinking a lot about Robert Putnam
the past couple of weeks.
It was early in 2015 that he published a work,
"Our Kids: the American Dream in Crisis."
Putnam documented in this work the demise,
the "stump-like state" of the dream
that anybody can make it in America
if they just seize the ample opportunities
they are afforded.

Putnam argues we are not one people
on a level playing field, but terribly divided
by a great "opportunity gap."
Many are leading charmed lives -
the privileged making great advances;
but more face every-day perils of crime, poverty,
under-employment, unemployment,
with no prospects for change. Stagnant lives
denied hope, with no vision promising relief.

It is important for us, in the church,
to not grow weary, to hold fast,
and to nourish ourselves in the gift of
such vision as seen by Isaiah.

Which brings to mind the Quaker painter,
Edward Hicks (1780-1849), who gained some
fame as a folk artist. He was taught the trade
of being a coach and house painter;
being drawn to the Quaker faith, the practice,
attracted to the notion of “inner light” it proclaimed.
For a time he was a minister; and he was quite
successful as a decorative painter.

What is interesting about Hicks, is that
he painted Isaiah 11:6-8.
Titled: “The Peaceable Kingdom.”
But he didn’t paint it just once or twice.
He painted it and painted it,
again and again.
There are 62 versions of Hicks
putting Isaiah on canvas.
Various compositions of leopards, lions,
the ox and the lamb. Native and European
immigrant Americans mingling.
And always there is the child;
the children are always there in the mix.
It is vision of creation – not in chaos,
not violent and bloody, fouled,
misshapen, unhinged, screaming people.
But creation as it was in the beginning,
what it will be, as Hicks/Isaiah saw it could be.
Hicks never seems to have given it up,
the vision of **the Peaceable Kin-dom.**

Our challenge: to retrieve Isaiah's vision, to front and center it in our lives - to preserve and protect it and pass it along to our children, for our children. The vision serves to "**stir**" us up. It reminds us that we are called to form community that keeps such vision, such hope for peace alive.

It was Herman Melville who once said:
**"we become sad in the first place
because we have nothing stirring to do."**

Advent comes to break our sadness,
to remind us while we have time,
there are stirring things to do
to advance the peace we hope for all people.

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I want to close with word from Stanley Hauerwas, who once wrote a book called *The Peaceable Kingdom*, which he subtitled: "A Primer in Christian Ethics."

Hauerwas has an interesting take on the church. The church of Jesus Christ is a miracle. He isn't talking about an invisible church, an ideal church, a church of perfection in "our dreams." The church is a miracle because we are; because we are here; today; for good; we are engaged, celebrating sacrament, preaching the word, encouraging one another to lead - to lead upright lives.

Hauerwas cautions: we don't simply tell the Jesus story. We are summoned to enact it. To show and tell and share it, which is why the sacraments are so crucial for our lives, for they provide the content necessary to shape and stir our lives.

Table grace, according to Hauerwas,
is the church's most fervent prayer.
And he reminds: prayer is an act in which
we make ourselves open to God's presence.
Prayer is the way **"we let God loose in the world."**
(Enda McDonagh; see *The Peaceable Kingdom*, p. 108).

Though common activity in church,
prayer is **"dangerous"** activity.
God's presence is not easily controlled.
**"God is a wild presence calling us to
ways of life we had not imagined possible."**

Who knew - Advent, a dangerous season
in the life of the church.
A people in darkness, waiting,
praying for a dawn, a people, open, receptive,
pleading Immanuel, willing to be stirred.

And if God comes, as God comes-
it is as Wild Presence,
Holy, Wonderful, Wise -
stirring good in us, grace in us,
that we might be fully alive within our means.
God comes - as Child with us, for the Child in us.

No one, no place,
is beyond the reach.

Amen.

*(Sermons are typically composed in haste,
for the demands of the day are many;
so be charitable as you read; and remember:
the contents of this sermon have not been edited
and may or may not have been a part of its public presentation)*