

**Sermon**

**“Because There’s Something About Christmas”**

December 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019 ~ First Presbyterian Church

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

Based on Isaiah 11:1-10 and Matthew 3:1-12

**SCRIPTURES:**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

<sup>1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. <sup>2</sup> The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. <sup>3</sup> His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; <sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. <sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. <sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. <sup>10</sup> On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. [NRSV]

**Matthew 3:1-12**

<sup>1</sup> In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup> “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” <sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” <sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, “You brood of vipers! Who

warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.” [NRSV]

**OPENING PRAYER:** God of hope and peace, be near us as your Word is read and proclaimed. Send your Spirit to illumine our hearts and minds, that we may know what it is you are saying to us this day. Most of all, may the truth of your Word transform our lives, so that your light will be seen through us; and let all God’s people say ... Amen.

### **Imagining the Impossible**

There is not a single person sitting in this sanctuary today that has known a lifetime of peace. No one here has known a time without war and violence. Every generation of us has experienced an unpeaceable world at one time or another, and for one reason or another. Even the youngest of us at this church are growing up in a frightful and conflicted world. It is as if true peace is impossible to achieve.

But, still we pray for it—indeed, we pray for the impossible all the time. We pray for certain things to occur when they most likely will not, and we pray for other things to *not* occur when they most certainly will. We pray to pass quizzes or exams when we have not properly studied or prepared for them. We pray for time to slow down or even turn back. We pray for quick fixes to problems that have taken long periods to create. And, yes, we pray for peace, as illusive and impossible as it may seem. At the end of the day, we cannot help ourselves because God created us with one of the most powerful gifts of all—our imagination! And, so we imagine and long for and dream about, and we hope and pray and look forward for the impossible to become possible because that’s how God made us.

This is essentially what the four Sundays of Advent are all about—the impossible becoming possible. They are about God addressing our deep and abiding need for hope, peace, joy, and love, and how all these things and more are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Advent is about imagining and anticipating what seems not just unlikely, but truly impossible—that a baby born in Bethlehem brings the promise of hope, peace, joy, and love—that a baby brings the promise of God’s peaceable kingdom to our unpeaceable world—that God enters into our conflicted world through the innocence of a baby to make the impossible possible.

### **God’s Peaceable Kingdom**

On this second Sunday of Advent we focus ourselves on the advent of peace, as seen in Isaiah’s vision of a peaceable kingdom—of a peaceable world, not above us or beyond us, but here and now, among us. And, what does Isaiah describe—nothing less than a fantasy suitable for Christmas cards and the like. Isaiah says that “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them” (*Isaiah 11:6*). I have a Christmas tree ornament on my desk, given to me as a gift long ago, that shows a lion and a lamb cuddling together in front of a green Christmas tree, and it says at the bottom “Peace on Earth.” It’s adorably cute, but every time I look at it, I wonder, is it possible? Isaiah is basically describing a return to the ideal world of God’s original creation in Genesis, when not even animals were predators and prey, but when all God’s creatures grazed in peace in a world where even little children can be safe in the face of any perceived danger.

I don’t know about you, but I want this sort of peace. I want the day to come when Isaiah’s seemingly impossible vision is made possible and real. Yes, it may look and sound all too warm and fuzzy on a Christmas card or ornament, but I’d like to remind you that we believe in a God who makes the impossible possible! I have a t-shirt from a youth ministry group I served with back in college, and on the front it shows a lion’s hand and a sheep’s hoof doing the fist-bump. Then, on the back of the shirt it shows a larger scene where a lion and a lamb are sitting side-by-side in beach chairs, fist-bumping while watching the sunset over the ocean, and the catch phrase says, “Don’t think it won’t happen just because it

hasn't happened yet." And, so we wait for the advent of Isaiah's peaceful vision, and we must imagine and long for and dream about, and hope and pray and look forward for the impossible to become possible because that's how God made us.

### John the Baptist

Then, there's one of the most interesting characters in the Bible—John the Baptist—who comes to us in the midst of all the warm and fuzzy feelings of the season, proclaiming this same essential message. But, John's got a really different way about him—he's dressed in really strange clothes and speaking in very strange ways—and it helps to understand why. You see, when John came, the Jewish people were sadly aware that the voice of the prophets had long been silent. For over 400 years they had waited for God's voice to come among them once again. And, *John was that voice*. He was like a light that lit up their darkness, and like a fresh wind that swept across the world. He was the bridge from Isaiah's past to the Messiah's future.

Also of note, it was the Jewish belief that Elijah, the greatest prophet of them all, would return just *before* the Messiah arrived, and that he would herald the coming of the Christ. And, who does John bear a striking resemblance to—Elijah. John is dressed just like Elijah is described in 2 Kings 1:8. So John is portrayed as a prophetic figure that looks like Elijah and speaks like Isaiah. But, when people heard him say the Messiah was coming, they had a hard time believing it from a guy who ate bugs and dressed kind of funny. Yet they followed him and listened to him because they wanted to hear more about the One coming—the promised One who makes the impossible possible. And, it was through Isaiah's words, the language of the past, that allowed John to share a vision of God's future coming for which we all imagine and long for and dream about, and hope and pray and look forward to! It was in the looking back that John helps us to look forward—to look forward to, and prepare the way for, the One God has promised; the one who has been promised to have “the spirit of wisdom and understanding” and “the spirit of counsel and might” (*Isaiah 11:2*).

### The Stump of Jesse

Which brings us back to Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom ... and it

begins with a stump. Isaiah says that “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots” (*Isaiah 11:1*). Isaiah is describing the ideal ruler from the bloodline of King David, who will usher in a peace that’s so universal that it will extend even to the animal world. But, notice that the transformation from an unpeaceable world to God’s peaceable kingdom begins with something we most often associate with being cut off, cut down, finished, lifeless, and forgotten. Yet, from such a place comes new life and new possibilities; for from the “stump of Jesse” a branch, a sprig, will sprout and bear fruit. The Messiah will come. The Messiah *has* come.

On this second Sunday of Advent, we are invited to remember that God’s promise of hope, peace, joy, and love has already been fulfilled in the child of Bethlehem. Isaiah’s vision and promise is not just a future hope. It is not above us or beyond us, but here and now, among us. Yes, it takes a lot of hard work on our part and a heaping dose of prayer. But, even now, tiny and small they may be, there are signs of hope and life in places that are cut off and discarded and forgotten, seemingly finished and lifeless. Because to God, there are no such places—there is nowhere that is discarded or forgotten or overlooked or finished in God’s peaceable kingdom. Because there is nothing impossible for God.

Speaking of the seemingly impossible ... last week I shared my fascination with stories about organ transplant donors and recipients, and this week I want to share a couple different type of stories to help illustrate the point. I’ve also always been captivated by stories of truce and peace in times of war ... like in a Christmas Day cease-fire moment when a Confederate captain and a Union private greeted each other cheerfully across the Rappahannock River and then met on rocks in its middle to swap tobacco and coffee and some friendly conversation. I also like the story of the Christmas Eve truce of 1914 during World War 1, when on the battlefields of Flanders, one of the most unusual events in all of human history took place. As the story goes ... all of a sudden, German troops began to put small Christmas trees, lit with candles, outside of their trenches. Then, they began to sing songs. Across the way of the “no man's land” between them came songs from the British and French troops. A spontaneous truce resulted. Soldiers

left their trenches, meeting in the middle of “no man’s land” to shake hands. The first order of business was to bury the dead who had been previously unreachable because of the conflict. Then, they exchanged gifts of chocolate cake, cognac, postcards, newspapers, tobacco, and more. In a few places along the trenches, soldiers exchanged rifles for soccer balls and began to play games. Of course, it didn’t last forever. But, for a few precious moments in the midst of one of the most horrible conflicts the earth has ever seen, there was peace on earth and good will toward men—all because the focus was on Christmas. Because there's something about Christmas that changes people, isn't there? There's something about Christmas that makes the impossible possible, bringing Isaiah's vision a little closer to fruition.

### **Because There's Something About Christmas**

As I said in the beginning, Advent is about imagining and anticipating stories like this ... that what seems not just unlikely, but truly impossible, becomes possible because of Christmas ... because of the manger. And, when we remember Christmas and the manger, we remember that a baby born in Bethlehem brings the promise of God's peaceable kingdom to our unpeaceable world. When we remember Christmas and the manger, we remember that God enters into our conflicted world through the innocence of a baby to make the impossible possible. When we remember Christmas and the manger, we remember that God's promise of hope, peace, joy, and love has already been fulfilled in the child of Bethlehem. And, one day the world *will see* the wolf living with the lamb and the leopard lying down with the kid.

Because there's something about Christmas, isn't there? Hey, as my old t-shirt says, “Don't think it won't happen just because it hasn't happened yet.” 🙄

Thanks be to God! Amen.