

St James United Church

Message for December 4, 2022
Second Sunday of Advent



“Seeking Lasting Peace”

- Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Isaiah 2:1-5; Matthew 3:1-12

As I shared last week, we spend a lot of time waiting at this time of year. We also spend a lot of time seeking: looking for a particular treat to round off Christmas dinner, trying to find the right outfit for a holiday event, searching for the perfect gift. And searching is the operative word if you have children and so are on the hunt for this year’s must-have toy. When I was young it was cabbage patch kids. We all know the resulting mayhem when just a few were left at a store. So much for peace on earth and good will to all when a shipment came in, everyone yelling and jostling, and even punching to get the last doll.

It's an ironic situation because while people may be looking for an impossible to find toy, what they really want is deeper. What we say we love about this time of year is, love, that spirit of caring and community that comes each December, holding out hope that this year we may be a wider family than just who drops by the house to eat some turkey. That’s the vision we get in Isaiah 2 as people beat swords into ploughs and everyone feels secure enough to vow never to learn the art of war again. It is a vision of peace through mutual respect. There is not just one nation that goes up to Zion, but all nations, many sources joined together into one stream. It’s a plurality, a plurality of nations, faiths, cultures, no one having to let go of their culture or faith. Everyone keeps their identity even as they join together, offering a promise of true peace.

With the war in Ukraine, this peace feels more elusive this year. But there seems to be another current too, one pulling us away from rather than toward each other. We feel it in news reports from this week. Like in Winnipeg where police linked the deaths of four Indigenous women to one man, a reminder not just of threats that all women face but as the Inquiry into Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls revealed, that Indigenous people, especially women, face greater risks because their lives are devalued. Or the news from Buffalo where the young man who opened fire in a grocery store admitted he traveled across the state just to kill Black people. It’s only a couple of weeks since someone killed five people in a Colorado LGBTQI+ club. And there’s Kanye West on a show with a Holocaust denier, praising Hitler. Many see this last incident as a part of a rising tolerance of anti-Semitic rhetoric in society.

I shake my head and yet also know I'm not above these attitudes. As you know I love musicals and there’s a song in one called “Avenue Q” which is truer than I like to admit. “Everyone’s a Little Bit Racist”. Now it overlooks that racism is more than prejudice, that it includes one group with power over another, but it speaks to how we all make judgments, often in a second. There

was a study where people were asked to choose between positives or negatives when shown a face on a computer. More often those who identify as white pressed the positive button when they saw a white face, negative for darker skin. Surprisingly, participants who identify as Black had a slight bias toward whiteness, the internalizing of generations of racism. Thankfully, this lessens as people of different skin tones mix more with one another, but bias is still there, even with good intentions, a reminder I need to examine my heart for Isaiah's vision to come true.

And as I do, I'm taking seriously John's call, and subsequently Jesus' call to repent, that is to honestly look at my life and make different choices. This is key if we're going to follow Jesus' lead and not simply preach that people need to change but model how they can live differently. Jesus did this by bringing people of different backgrounds together, not sifting one group from another as wheat from chaff, as perhaps John had expected that he would do, but inviting his followers to do some inner sifting so that they could be peace. This still applies. It's tempting like the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to John to say I don't need to confess, that I am somehow above that as a minister. But I need to be conscious of my actions, and the attitudes that lead to them, otherwise I may end up sowing discord rather than cultivating peace.

And so like last week, I'd like to offer a prayer practice. In this one you take time to review your day as a way to be more aware not just of what you do but the feelings that influence them. We often do this kind of reflection by looking at the start of the day but in this you begin at the end and go back. Like rewinding a video, it slows the process down and helps you intentionally look not just at actions but their causes. Here's an example. As I begin, I see myself step away to pray. I ask how I was feeling just before. I look at how I didn't do the dishes first, even though I promised Glen I would. I ponder what led to that. Was I tired? Annoyed? Projecting an earlier situation in the day onto him? Then I continue looking back. This practice is most useful for looking at interactions that may include unconscious bias. Here's a couple of possible scenarios. Perhaps I reflect on how I was walking on the sidewalk and gave extra space than I normally would. I realize the person coming toward me was Black. What was I feeling just before doing that? Or perhaps I ponder how I was in a store trying to get that toy. I recall I was more aggressive to someone. Then I realize that they looked Middle Eastern. Again what was in my mind, even for a second? This practice helps me be more conscious of the reactions which influence my actions, of unconscious biases, and in turn make better choices, in other words it helps me to repent, and so act more in line with the peaceful world God dreams for us.

In the end it's about God's dream for us, the peace we seek possible through grace. Jesus called diverse people into community, but he was also a person of prayer, knowing firsthand that we are not alone in our inner sifting, God at work in us, drawing us together as a wider family, inviting all nations to stream together. Why does God do this? Because God is the stream, the flow of love that pulls many sources into one. There does seem to be another undercurrent at work, but I know in my heart that the pull of God's love is stronger. This Advent may we feel that pull, the draw to keep seeking lasting peace, peace within us, peace between us, the peace that only God can give. Amen.