

Opening Advent - A Group Devotional
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Leader: The Lord be with you.

Group: And also with you.

Leader: Let us pray—

Almighty God,

we give you thanks for this day and for these people gathered.

We give you thanks for this season of celebration—

for the gift of your Son Jesus Christ,

and for your Kingdom brought into our midst.

We ask that by the power of your Holy Spirit,

you would make us to be participants

in your work of peace and justice and righteousness.

In the name of our Coming Lord, we pray.

Group: Amen.

Leader: As we prepare to celebrate the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ,
let us turn to God's holy Word.

The Prophet Isaiah gives us a picture of the Peaceful Kingdom—
a picture of the plans God has for His beloved world.

Hear now the word of God from Isaiah 11:1-10:

¹ A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

² 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.

³ 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;

⁴ 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.

⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶ 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.

⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They 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.

¹⁰On 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.

Leader: The Word of the Lord.

Group: Thanks be to God.

Leader: This season of Advent is a season of contrasts—
bright Christmas lights contrast the darkening winter days,
the busyness of holiday shopping and parties contrast the invitation
to wait patiently for Christ's return.

And certainly, this image of the Peaceful Kingdom from Isaiah
sharply contrasts much of our experience in the world today,
in part, because this passage of peace and unity—of inclusion and welcome—
flies in the face of a world that seems to prefer contrast.

We live in the world of "either/or."

We live in a world in which you are either a democrat or a republican;
a world in which you are either black or white, citizen or "alien";
either a dog person or a cat person;
either you agree with me, or you are wrong ...

In an "either/or" world, we just don't experience the kind of reality that Isaiah presents.

What Isaiah gives us is an almost comical, thoroughly unimaginable set of possibilities
in which carnivorous animals reside in peace and unity with their prey,
the victim with the victimizer,
the vulnerable and the voiceless and the oppressed are called forward, and
the powerful are told to hold back, to make room— unimaginable!

But it is just this set of possibilities that God envisions for the world.

Now I don't know about you, but when it comes to my emotions and energy, there are many things
that occupy my mind far more greatly than the predator/prey relationships of the animal
kingdom.

But when I read this passage from Isaiah,
I realize that there are certainly situations in this world
whose unity and resolution carry the same *absurdity*
as the imagery of this text.

Were I to re-write some of Isaiah's prophecy,
while thinking of that which weighs heavy on my own heart,
rather than writing "the wolf shall live with the lamb ..." I might say:

"The wealthy CEO shall live with the panhandler,
the oppressed shall sit with their oppressors and be at peace,
the Black and the White and the Latino and Asian together.
and Christ shall lead them all.
Democrats and Republicans shall share a meal,
each of their supporters will listen and understand one another;
and they will share in common the needs and desires of all.
Children of all ages will go to school without threat of violence or bullying,
and people of color will live without fear of prejudice or discrimination."

Right now, this kind of world seems unimaginable—
perhaps as unimaginable as the Creator of the universe becoming a powerless
infant.

It is precisely the unimaginable that became possible at the Incarnation—
and not merely possible, but a reality.

That is what we celebrate this and every Christmas.

During this Advent season,
as we prepare for Christmas
and as we celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ,

I encourage you to think:

in the midst of all the brokenness and division we experience,
What are the things that you can't imagine being united?
Where are the places that you cannot imagine peace?

And *know* that in Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit,
what seems unimaginable is in fact possible.

And that day by day, through Christ's transforming work,
the unimaginable is increasingly becoming our reality.

And then step out

and *be* that unity and peace in those very places where it seems most impossible.

I invite you now to start by being that unimaginable peace to one another—
turn to each of those standing around you—
those you know and those you don't know,
those similar to you and those different from you—
take their hand, or embrace them and say, "Peace be with you."

Leader: May the peace that Christ has made a reality be with you all.

Group: And also with you.

Leader: Amen.