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First Christian Church
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Know: Peace

Isaiah 11:1-10 NRSV 1A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2The 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. 3His 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; 4but 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. 5Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6The 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.

Some of you may remember that during the 1980s Hollywood movies went through period that might be called "Texas Chic." "Urban Cowboy," with John Travolta was probably the most famous, but there were others, like "Places in the Heart" with Sally Field – which still has one of the most powerful communion scenes I have ever seen on celluloid. Even Willie Nelson got in the act, making a movie or two that confirmed that he shouldn't quit his day job. One film, less well-known, but powerfully poignant was the film "Tender Mercies," starring Robert Duvall as a washed-up, alcoholic country music singer named Mac who drifts his way into a small Texas town and then, to his surprise, into the affections of a local widow and her ten-year old son. Mac and the widow began dating, and he begins going to church with them and then

eventually decides to be baptized. On the way home from church that Sunday afternoon, the son says to Mac *“Well, we done it, Mac. We’re baptized.... Everybody said I was gonna feel like a changed person. I guess I do feel a little different, but I don’t feel a whole lot different, do you?”* And Mac replies *“Not yet, not yet.”*¹

Last week we had the delightful occasion to baptize four of our wonderful folks. But I would hazard to say that *their* answers to the boy’s question might well be the same as Mac’s: *“Not yet, not yet.”* But you know what? That is actually to be expected and it is actually one of the best things about the Christian faith; as I said last week faith is always a matter of affirming the **“already”** that God has done through Christ, and the **“not yet”** of the continued work that Christ calls us to help Him do. The wonderful writer and poet Maya Angelou says this much more succinctly when she once remarked: *“I’m trying to be a Christian. I’m working at it, and I’m amazed when people walk up to me and say, ‘I’m a Christian.’ I think, ‘Already? Wow!’”*² This indeed is the dynamic, the character of Advent: **the already and the not yet**. And it applies to baptism and learning day by day to be a better Christian, and it also oh-so-applies to our topic of the morning, **peace**. *Peace*. In the worldwide church, the second Sunday of Advent has long been celebrated as “Peace Sunday” and these verses from Isaiah have long been the scripture associated with the coming of the One we call the Prince of Peace. But what shall we say about this topic this morning that isn’t either shallowly sentimental or incipiently ideological? How do we re-capture this as a *Christian* notion and back from

¹<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0086423/> The film can be watched at <http://viooz.co/movies/8484-tender-mercies-1983.html> The baptisms begin at about 62:00 into the film.

²Quoted at http://theorthodoxfool.blogspot.com/2010_08_01_archive.html

those on either left or right who, ironically, seem to use “peace” as a weapon. How do we truly hear what Isaiah is trying to tell us and hold in creative tension the “**already**” and the “**not yet**”?

Comedian Woody Allen once remarked of this passage, “*Well, the lion and the lamb may lie down together, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.*” I think that the lamb is onto something, because what I want to do in the rest of this sermon is to talk about four myths about peace, four myths about why the peace that comes from being a Christian, the peace that Christ promises in His coming, can in fact delude and dispirit us **IF** we misinterpret what Christ’s peace means for a Christian. So let’s see what those are.

The first myth is that the peace that Christ brings to you as a Christian means you’ll always be happy. A writer by the name of Stephen Mattson puts the point this way: “*There’s an unhealthy expectation... that we’re always supposed to be joyful, as if being anything other than a smiling, peaceful, and jolly spiritual cheerleader is...*”³ not to be Christian. But we know that isn’t so: From the pre-Christmas squabbles – has your family had one yet? – about whether the lights should be white or colored, whether the stocking gifts are to be wrapped or unwrapped, whether Christmas dinner will require turkey or ham, and on and on, to the much more disquieting wonderings about whether this peace business is even possible in a world so hurting and broken.

So let me say this: the peace that the coming of Christ brings to those who are

³Stephen Mattson, “Seven Lies About Christianity -- Which Christians Believe,” <http://sojo.net/blogs/2013/12/03/seven-lies-about-christianity-which-christians-believe> I’m indebted to this blog post for some of his points and for some of the direction of this sermon.

Christian is NOT about always being happy. In fact, Christ's peace – as opposed to Hallmark's or Disney's peace – is one that will at times make you profoundly unhappy with what is and profoundly wanting to help God work for the not-yet. For you see, Jesus hopes that none of us will be “happy” in the face of poverty and pain, or children killing children, or one billion people in this world you do not have clean water, or the folks whom we know who are so desperately feeling a hole in their hearts from a missing place at the Christmas table. No, the “peace that passes understanding,” as Jesus puts it elsewhere, is something that indeed moves us from understanding to action. And **that** is where true peace lies: in knowing that your life is offering hope and healing to someone else. And that is so much better than just “happiness.”

There's a second myth about the peace that Christ promises for Christians and that is this: That your problems all disappear. The corollary of that is that if you're having problems, that must mean that you somehow aren't sufficiently Christian, else Christ's purported peace would rid you of all those problems. But that's just a pernicious and dispiriting lie, isn't it? This is what, to quote him again, Stephen Mattson has to say about this second myth: The peace of Christ for Christians

isn't about ignoring reality but embracing it, engaging the real world and all the baggage that comes with it. ...[F]ollowing Jesus causes us to accept — and confront — the facts, whether they are good or bad.... [F]aith in Christ requires honesty and bravery, and it demands sacrifice, service, and heartbreak. The New Testament shows us that Jesus' disciples faced even more problems when

they decided to follow him: persecution, poverty, and ultimately martyrdom.⁴

No, Christ's peace doesn't mean all your problems go away; but it does mean that the circle of your care widens, the bounds of your empathy are enlarged, and that the hurt of others becomes not just their problem but your problem too!

A third myth about the peace that Christ promises for Christian is this: **You will be at peace financially because God will bless you with prosperity.** This is a particularly insidious one, particularly at this time of year, when advertisers know just how to play on both our desires and our guilt. And as much as I have admired Dave Ramsey's work, and as much as I know that there are a number of you who have found his tactics and teachings on how to have a financially responsible household that honors God, lately he has been making the claim that has gone beyond what he has said in the past. Lately Ramsey has been saying that being a Christian, being possessed of the peace of Christ, will mean that you will in fact be "blessed" financially by ever-greater prosperity in your own life and household. But, my friends, that's just false. And again, it leads to the pernicious notion that if you are *not* doing well financially, if you struggle with your credit cards and with too many months that have more month than money, then it is a sign that there is something wrong with your faith. Moreover, this notion that the blessing of God and the peace of Christ inevitably leads to personal financial "blessing" is simply a misuse of the word "blessing," and it is not at all what Jesus, the One whose coming we celebrate this Advent, talked about. Let me put it baldly: the peace of Christ has nothing to do with being financially prosperous.

⁴Ibid.

Hear again Mr. Mattson's very wise words on this subject:

If you're seeking wealth, prosperity, comfort, and security, Christianity isn't the place to go.... Contrary to our consumer tendencies, Jesus' teachings continually instruct believers to sacrifice and be willing to give everything away for the sake of loving others.⁵

As folks like Don Sarton and Bill Robertson in our congregation have repeatedly reminded us from their long work with church donors across the country, *the most peace-filled people are in fact the ones who give the most away*

One last myth about what the coming of Christ's peace, Christ's blessing into your life will mean and that is this: **That you will never have any more questions or doubts.** Sorry, no. But consider a couple of things. Your questions and your doubts put you in very good company! Look at how many times the writer of the Psalms asks God: "*How long, O God?*" or "*Why is this happening?*" or even "*Do you really care about us?*" Look at that wonderful story of Moses and God when God had decided to give up on the Hebrew people as they whined and griped their way through the Exodus from Egypt; Moses essentially got in God's face and said "*Do you really want to do this, God, really?!?*" We can name many more examples, both from the scriptures and from the lives of those whom any one of us would count as among the saints. No, to live is to question – or it should mean that! – and blessing of the peace of Christ serves in fact to make you an even **better** questioner. The peace of Christ makes you question hatreds that don't make sense, or practices that demean folks, or economic arrangements that

⁵Ibid.

are based more on bias than anything else. Hear how Mr. Mattson puts things one final time:

Christianity is full of doubt, uncertainty, nuance, and complexity.... As believers, we need to start accepting the fact that we don't know everything. When we try to turn the Bible into a set of answers to all of the world's challenges and questions, we end up manipulating the message of Christ and forming it into our own agendas just to appease our curiosity or quell the objections of others.

And that is hardly the peace that Christ promises or calls us to.

Peace. *Peace.* The world is not yet at peace. Each life in this room will continue to have hurts. Each one of us will sometimes be tempted to say to God, in the face of that announcement of lions and lambs, of swords and plowshares, "*Yeah, right.*" But my friends, on this morning, know this, know this: the story of Advent, the words that the prophet proclaims, are once again the reminder of the already and the not-yet. God has already said how things will end, and God has already offered us the opportunity to live even now in a way that embodies that end. And even though, like that boy in "Tender Mercies," we may not feel it sometimes, that is not really the best measure of this world is it? For feel it or not, and in the midst of myths that would try to distract us, the coming Christ Child calls us to do our very best to know and live out the peace that is coming, the peace of the One whom all the earth will know and indeed, as Isaiah says, it will be glorious. May the peace of the coming Christ be with you all!

Amen.