**The Smell of Christmas**

**Peace: The Second Week of Advent**

**December 3. 2022**

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*The wolf will romp with the lamb,  
    the leopard sleep with the kid.  
Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,  
    and a little child will tend them.  
Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,  
    their calves and cubs grow up together,  
    and the lion eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,  
    the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.  
Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill  
    on my holy mountain.  
The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,  
    a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.* Isaiah 11:6-10

I’ve been thinking about peace this week and why it is so hard to find. Yesterday morning, after a delightful coffee with a parishioner, I took my worried old self to the woods, as I always do, and I walked Scorton Creek, the marsh and the pitch pine forest, the scrub oaks and the meadows recently mowed to allow for sweeping pastures and the return of the grasses to the land. Each day that I walk is different. I follow Mary Oliver’s rule to pay attention and tell about it.

Yesterday my car was being serviced at Cannings Service Center, so Reed dropped me and the two goldens off at the creek and I ran into one of my favorite woodland friends. His name is Dave Hickey. Many of you may know him as he is a professional musician who plays most nights in Irish pubs and at the Harvest Wine Bar. Dave is Irish, from Dublin, and moved here in the 1980’s. He’s good friends with the former pastor, Bob Spaulding as they both live in the same neighborhood right down the street from West Parish. Now Dave is a Catholic and I’m a Protestant, but we both love to talk about the Gospels and the challenge of faith today. What a delightful person to walk a few miles with as he is accompanied by his small dog Stanley and I walk with Ida and Sailor.

We spoke about Peace and the passage from Isaiah where “the wolf will romp with the lamb and the leopard sleep with the kid. And even a nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens, the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent. Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill on my holy mountain. The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive. A living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean wide.” Isaiah 11:6, 8-9)

David challenged me to think about what Jesus would say right now about guns. I said, I think if Jesus came back today he would have a lot to say about turning guns into plowshares, about what peace would mean. Why do we need so many arms to feel safe? What is peace-keeping? What would Jesus say about our peace or lack of peace today? David and I kept walking and talking. He noticed that so many people at the park seem to be struggling with many challenges. And I said, that could be the hour that we walk, during the morning, or it could be the human condition. The longer we walk beside one another, the more miles we walk beside one another, the more we reveal to one another about how difficult things really are. When someone asks, “How are you?” we typically respond, “fine” or “things are great.” But what if we responded with the truth? Things aren’t fine. I am not at peace. My family is not at peace. My work is so stressful and making me ill. What can I do? How do I deal with a difficult diagnosis? Am I dying?

And so, this is why I walk. I walk because sometimes I am at peace. And sometimes, I am struggling. But the walking, the paying attention to the bird song, the wind chill or the sunshine across the wide open pasture, the stiff ocean whipping up the creek or the crunch of frozen oak leaves reminds me that I am a part of the circle of life. This right-sizing, this paying attention to the smell of the earth, and the smell of the sea, the stink of my dogs after rolling in something dead, or the wet dog smell after they swim in the creek, connect me to what it means to be alive.

As we are preparing for Christmas, and we are thinking about the smells of Christmas, let’s imagine what it really smelled like in a manger. If there were donkeys, they smell a bit, and their poop is relatively inoffensive as they are plant-based. Sheep smell like lanolin. The humans stunk, with no place to bathe and having traveled for a long way, I hope the innkeeper offered them some water and some lanolin soap to wash the dust off their faces and feet. If Mary and Joseph were afraid, they smelled of fear. It was dark at night, with only stars to light the way and light up the manger. Maybe Joseph lit a small fire, maybe not. The smell of the fire would have the scent of sap and wood smoke. Did Mary prepare simple food? What did they eat? Did they have enough money to buy meat? Probably not? Maybe some soup or beans or bread. Being poor meant inadequate food. I wonder what the early home of Jesus smelt like.

I think the peace of wild things, the peace of the forest, the smell of sap sizzling in a small hearth fire, bring us closer to the scent of the manger.

We want to remember Christmases’ of the past. And imagine the perfect Christmas we can re-create this year. And definitely, remember the good parts and allow the pain of the past to soften. And yet, it might do us all some good if we take to heart my friend David Hickey, the Irish singer’s advice, what if we started to look for peace first at home. How can we build peace at home ? And then, he challenged me to find peace with those I differ with radically from who walk the same woods at Scorton, those who have NRA stickers on their cars and seem angry. Perhaps, he said, that’s where I need to begin my work for peace.

Where do you, where do I need to begin to look for peace? How do we become peacemakers? If we are to imagine what it might mean to know this radical peace idea of the prophet Isaiah where the wild kingdom becomes a peaceable kingdom, the peace that was meant to be must begin with you and me.

I know that I need to begin with forgiveness. First, I need to forgive myself and then others. I’m so good at remembering wrongs and holding onto historical hurts. I never forget. And that isn’t freedom, nor will it lead to peace.

I think I will begin again, tomorrow. And in the meantime, I will imagine what foods I want to make for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day when my family comes home. I hope and pray that there will be peace at last, and if there isn’t let us all practice the difficult path of living into peace through forgiveness.

Amen.