



Building Peace

Isaiah 11:1-10

We like the idea of peace. We sing songs of peace and read poems telling the wonders of a peaceful rest from war, violence, and the ravages of human conflict. We are enamored with the idea that peace might be a real possibility, yet we have rarely seen more than passing glimpses of the peace for which we so yearn. If peace could actually become a reality, how in the world would we go about planning for and constructing such a thing? How could peace take a foothold in our lives and become an increasing reality?

Amid our yearning for peace, we hear Jesus' words that his peace is different from the peace we seek. We want the cessation of hostility and violence, but he spoke to the disciples of a peace amid the violence and conflict they would consistently face. Perhaps there is no such thing as the peace we yearn for after all. But then, what do we do with passages like Isaiah 11, with its beautiful picture of the very kind of peace we seem so desperately to crave?

Isaiah did not write these words from some idyllic protected place. Conflict surrounded the nation on all sides. There was a push to seek military alliance with Egypt in order to maintain a semblance of normalcy from the press of Assyria's encroaching power. There were other skirmishes in his time as well, with war between neighboring Syria and Ephraim, along with threats to the Davidic throne. Peace was far from a reality for the nation of Judah in the period cast in this chapter. The tenor of Isaiah's overall message was the inevitability of exile for his people. Yet it was in the midst of just that message that we find the words of this chapter speaking of a coming day of idyllic peace for Judah and Jerusalem.

It seemingly makes no sense. How can we think forward to some future time of peace while a people struggles with the pressing issues of impending political and military doom along with exile in their near future? Where is peace a reality amid such an ensuing storm?

Sure, part of Isaiah's message was that if the people had turned to God the storm would never have come in the first place. It could all have been avoided with a simple dependence and faithfulness toward Yahweh as the only God for Israel. At this point, however, he says things have progressed too far and there is no longer any avoiding the impending doom. They are simply to lie down and take their medicine, waiting and hoping for a new future and possibility God would create after a period of exile. So what's the use in a word of idyllic peace to come long after the nation has been carted off as spoils of war?

Perhaps we should pay more attention to the quality of that peace and less to the conflict on which the people were focused. The peace Isaiah defended would begin with the presence of God's spirit, God's breath coming over the anticipated king. His wisdom, intelligence and prudence would lead him, yes to power, but more so to know and obey God. It would be in this character of obedience and joining his will to the will of God that peace would actually being to live and flourish.

He would judge neither by appearances nor rumors, by in joyful obedience to God. The result would be that his actions would bring about the defense of the poor—those with less recourse to actions of violence, threat, and abuse. It has ever been thus. The voice of the poor is most easily ignored by those with recourse to power, wealth, and the fulfillment of their own needs. Defending the poor, however, is inextricably tied here to obedience to God. Isaiah links this defense of the poor to obedience to God, but also to working justice on behalf of the defenseless. This is the second arm of the same principle. To defend the poor and to offer what is right and just to the powerless are part and parcel of the same purpose to extend good with impartiality towards all.

This is what Isaiah sees as the way Yahweh governs. This king would simply align his priorities and position with the will of Yahweh to care for the poor, oppressed, and needy, granting them what is just and right. The word of Yahweh would be transformed through the king into the law of the land. This would mean not some religious decree of external worship, but the triumph of justice and truth. Judging on the basis of appearance, standing, position, or power would be swept aside on behalf of what is right and beneficial to all, not the few. Evil and evildoers would be swept aside in order that justice might reign from the halls of power to the streets of the powerless.

It is this sense of justice placed into practice that Isaiah hails as the highlight of the reign of God's king to arise from the stump of Jesse. The powerful do not need God's protection. They already hold sway in the political processes around the world. What was lacking for peace from Isaiah's perspective was justice and equity for the poor, hopeless, and downtrodden. This was the justice and worship that God was demanding from Israel and Judah's rulers that they had forsaken. Oh, they spoke of worshipping Yahweh, but they were consumed not with the interests of Yahweh's will, but on increasing their own power, wealth, and levels of comfort. This is what the exile would wash away as a flood.

On that day when God's peace would come, it would be the result of justice for the marginalized. Only then would the wolf and lamb get along, the tiger and kid rest together, the lamb and the lion grow side by side and be led by a child. Where there is justice for all, there is no more fear and violence to wield as weapons for dominion. Where there is full knowledge of Yahweh, there is real peace and violence is pushed aside to make room for love.

That is where peace begins. That is the character of true peace. It comes in knowing God and God's purposes for our lives and the lives of others.

Isaiah said that this knowledge of God was the ingredient most lacking in Judah and Israel of his day. It was no knowledge of the name of God or regarding the proper rituals in the cultic practice of worship. It had nothing to do with the music sung, the instruments played, not even the texts read or recited. It was about knowing God to the depth of allowing that knowledge to change how we relate to one another.

We have again today read these words of Isaiah, yet they fall on deaf ears. We still see governments, political parties, corporations, business leaders, and even ourselves striving to create peace by the use of force or even ignoring peace in the attempt to achieve other more personal aims and objectives. We see power and wealth used and abused not for the institution of what is right or just, but for the advancement of personal objectives. We see peace as the subjugation of all ideologies and perspectives that call into question our own. Yet that is not the peace of which Isaiah spoke so many centuries ago.

How do we build peace? It is not through the weapons and strategies of war. It is not through protecting the voice and interests of the powerful. It is not through defending the status quo against attacks from the outside. Isaiah says that we build peace by aligning our lives in obedience to the will and purposes of God in caring for those who lack power, wealth, voice, and privilege.

We must give up some things we consider important. We must lay aside our personal interests, dreams, ambitions, and values to align them with the character of God. Christ Jesus lay aside all that we would consider his personal interests to follow the true character of God's purposes. He came preaching release to the captives, sight to the blind, healing to the sick, and proclaiming the Good News of God's reign. This is the character of peace. If we are to build it, we must be fashioned after God's character.

—*Christopher B. Harbin*