

“Peace” - Stephanie Sorge, 12/8/19

There is unrest in the streets.

In Chile, what began in October as a small student-led protest over subway fare hikes has turned into hundreds of thousands of people in the streets, protesting economic inequality at all levels. Hundreds of thousands in Columbia staged similar protests last month. Haiti is facing numerous crises in the continued wake of protests over corruption, inflation, misappropriation of funds, and scarcity of basic necessities. Thousands in Indonesia have been protesting the weakened anti-corruption laws there. In Iran, hundreds of civilians have been killed in the past month while protesting prices surges and government corruption. In Hong Kong, Bolivia, and Venezuela, the protests have been going on for many months.<sup>1</sup> There is unrest in the streets.

Students flood a football field and thousands converge on DC to protest lack of action against climate change. Others continue to gather at the southern border to protest the brutal conditions, continued family separations, and the humanitarian crisis there. Pro- and anti-impeachment protests are springing up across the country as the hearings continue. Others protest the potential loss of access to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for 700,000 people who depend on it to feed themselves and their families. Just down the road in Augusta County, 1800

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/sites/sergeiklebnikov/2019/12/03/economic-protests-are-spreading-across-the-globe-heres-where-and-why/#7a0398c36b8f>

people gathered, mostly to support an ordinance to make the county a “sanctuary” for second amendment rights. There is unrest in the streets.

And so we pray for peace. Nelson Mandela said, “Peace is not just the absence of conflict; peace is the creation of an environment where all can flourish regardless of race, color, creed, religion, gender, class, caste or any other social markers of difference.” In other words, peace won’t be achieved once the protests stop. It can only be achieved when the whole environment has changed, when justice has been rendered. In the words of a well-known protest chant here in our own country: “No justice? No peace!”

It can be easy for us to focus on Isaiah’s beautiful vision, often called “The Peaceable Kingdom,” especially on this second Sunday of Advent. It’s odd that it comes here, in this first part of Isaiah, which is otherwise prophesying destruction and judgment. On the other hand, what is essentially the beginning of the Gospel - the good news - is an ominous call to repentance. We came for peace! Instead, we get judgment.

A study a few years ago by the Barna Group found that most young adults don’t have a particularly positive image of the church today. Among young adults who don’t go to church, 87% believe that the church is judgmental.<sup>2</sup> Are they wrong? After all, think of those voices often stationed in the public squares,

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.barna.com/research/what-millennials-want-when-they-visit-church/>

basically echoing the message of John the Baptist. Repent! Repent! Repent! I don't know that they would make me want to join a church.

That same message may be preached from certain pulpits each week, but the judgment that young adults perceive in the church goes beyond that. Certainly many churches cast judgment about certain behaviors. Far worse is the judgment against entire groups of beloved children of God. I want to distance myself far, far away from those kinds of churches. I want to say that all are welcome here, that you won't be judged for who you are, but seen as a beloved child of God. The gym franchise Planet Fitness calls themselves a "Judgment Free Zone," and in many ways I'd like to think of the church in the same way.

Rachel Held Evans was a voice crying in the wilderness for many people. Coming from a religious tradition where judgment was prevalent, she came to see God's love and welcome for all people to be fundamental to the gospel. About the church she wrote: "The church is God saying: 'I'm throwing a banquet, and all these mismatched, messed-up people are invited. Here, have some wine.'"<sup>3</sup> It sounds pretty welcoming, doesn't it?

But honestly, I think the temptation to judge others, and the challenge to truly be in fellowship and community with those who are very different from ourselves, is one that all of us face, even if we want to be a "judgment free zone." Nadiz Bolz-Weber is a heavily tattooed and pierced Lutheran pastor whose

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<sup>3</sup> Rachel Held Evans, [Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church](#)

language flows freely with four letter words. Her call to ministry was to be a pastor to many of her friends and community who had no place to go where they could be welcomed in worship and community. The church they planted - the House for all Sinners and Saints - became that ragtag motley crew that Rachel Held Evans envisioned around the table. Nadia reflects that they had to start admitting their own tendencies to judge when people wearing khakis and polo shirts began to show up to worship. The welcome table needed a new leaf. Wolf and lamb. Leopard and kid. Cow and bear. Tattoos and khakis.

I want church to be a judgment free zone, but we can't escape the fact that God's judgment is found throughout our holy texts. I'm troubled by it, and I don't quite know what to do with it. Of course the simple answer is that it isn't up to us to judge. I've heard some say "Welcome everyone, and let God sort out the rest." There's truth to that, I guess.

But Isaiah's vision of the peaceable kingdom doesn't happen just because someone finally thinks simply to invite the animals to sit down together. That vision is the result of what comes before it: one who will not "judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." Judgment precedes peace.

If we proclaim God's coming reign of peace and righteousness, we can't get there without judgment. That's John the Baptist's message - repent now - change your ways now. The kingdom of God IS coming, whether or not we are ready.

Repent now. Prepare now. Judgment day is coming. Apparently that is the good news of the gospel. Is it really good news?

Perhaps we should ask for whom it is good news. The answer is found in Isaiah. This is good news for the poor, the meek. Those who are being trampled upon now will find justice served. Those of us who are more comfortable now may find that we have some adjustments to make.

There is injustice all around us. The poor are being devoured. The vulnerable are being exploited. The very systems in which we live and operate every day are rigged in favor of those who are already on top, who have the most power, privilege, and wealth. There is injustice everywhere around us, and we can't simply skip from where we are to a place of peace without some serious and difficult work ahead of us.

That's where the judgment comes in. John talks about the baptism of fire, and wheat being separated from the chaff. The wheat is the good stuff; the chaff needs to be burned away. Similarly, the ax is ready to cut down any trees that aren't bearing good fruit.

The vision of a peaceable kingdom can't happen without major changes in behaviors, in systems. The wolves have to stop chasing after the lambs, but there also needs to be deep systemic change so that the lives of lambs are as valued as the lives of the wolves. The wolves need to see that their peace and wholeness are inextricably linked to the wellbeing of those lambs at their side.

There can be no peace without justice. We want to get to the peaceable kingdom, but we can't skip the difficult work of peacemaking and pursuing justice to get there. We need to thoroughly examine ourselves and the systems around us, and be prepared to cut away anything that isn't bearing good fruit, to be burned away. The work doesn't stop there, because true repentance is a change of direction. To maintain that change, one must continue down the new path. Repentance is the turn; reconciliation is the ongoing journey.

One who knows about this difficult road firsthand is Bishop Desmond Tutu, who writes: "Forgiving and being reconciled are not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the pain, the degradation, the truth. It could even sometimes make things worse. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end dealing with the real situation helps to bring real healing. Spurious reconciliation can bring only spurious healing."<sup>4</sup>

We proclaim the coming reign of Christ's true peace, and we point to an idyllic vision of that Peaceable Kingdom. We proclaim it, we await it, and we also prepare for it. Friends, we have work to do, here and now, starting with ourselves and the systems in which we live and operate. I close, once again, echoing the words from our opening candle lighting liturgy:

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<sup>4</sup> Desmond Tutu. No Future Without Forgiveness.

“I will wait for a lot of things, but I will not wait for peace. This world is rampant with division, walls, grudge-holding, and self-doubt. I do not want to be a passive bystander in this division. We do not want to be passive bystanders in this division. So today we light the candle of peace as a reminder that we have a role to play. May the desire to sow peace kindle in us like a light in the darkness. Amen.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> A Sanctified Art, 2019