



ADULT STUDY

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PARTICIPANT HANDOUT
Session 2

Peace, Justice, Joy, and Salvation: An Adult Advent Study

The Gift of Justice: The Peaceable Kingdom

Introduction

On January 1, 1972, Pope Paul VI issued a call to observe a “day of peace.” In his proclamation, the pope wrote: “If you want peace, work for justice.” This quickly became a slogan of sorts and was widely used in a variety of social justice movements. Peace, the pope said, is not simply the absence of conflict. Especially when peace in society is the result of pressure used to silence dissent or make people conform, that is not really peace. True peace, he said, is the result of a deep feeling for others, which he defined as respect. And respect in action is justice. So if you want peace, work for justice.

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In the biblical tradition of the law of Moses and the prophets, “justice” is not an abstract idea. Rather, it is based on both the character and the behavior of God. In particular, God’s act of liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt is at the root of what justice is supposed to look like. Justice is truly a gift of God, a gift that leads to abundant life.

Focus Text: Isaiah 11:1–10

Our focus text is an extension of the passage we considered last week. Both in Isaiah 2 and here in chapter 11, the prophet casts a vision that both defines God’s promised future and issues a call to action in the present. In chapter 2, the prophet envisioned a day when all nations and peoples would come to Jerusalem. They would seek instruction or guidance on how to live. Isaiah describes God’s curriculum like this: “nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” (2:4). No one will need to learn how to kill. Isaiah 11 fleshes this out by casting the incredible vision we have come to call the “peaceable kingdom”: “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” (v. 6). Peace is envisioned as the transformation of nature itself in which the seemingly normal pattern of predation is replaced by harmony and coexistence. Hunter and prey now graze together. And the most vulnerable of humans—a little child—shall lead them. “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain,” God says through the prophet (v. 9).

But the cosmic vision has a very this-worldly precondition. In order for this new world to appear, there must first be a transformation of the political order. The opening words make it clear that Isaiah is talking about the renewal of the monarchy: “a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse” (v. 1). Jesse, of course, was the father of David, the king from whom all later monarchs traced their lineage. Not only was David seen as the greatest of Israel’s kings (despite all his carefully recorded flaws and catastrophic failures). It was also understood that God had made an indelible covenant with David that his descendants would rule forever under God’s protection.

The Text in Context

Eventually, the Davidic dynasty ended with the Babylonian exile, but the concept of anointed leadership remained part of Israel’s religious imagination. Even during the time of the monarchy, the idea of a literal successor to David morphed into a moral vision of a leader who would restore the integrity of God’s people. By the time of Isaiah, some 250 years after David’s reign, the prophet was convinced that the current successors to David were a lifeless stump—morally bankrupt, utterly corrupt. Only an act of God could restore the promise, but that is precisely the vision that Isaiah casts. One day, God will make that lifeless stump produce new growth; life will emerge out of something that was dead. A new day will dawn. Isaiah pictures this as the coming of an individual leader (an “anointed one,” which is what “messiah” means). But the implications extend to the community as a whole. God offers God’s people the opportunity to do justice, which is what leads to peace.

Meanings of Justice

Human beings have debated what justice looks like for literally thousands of years. About seventeen hundred years before the birth of Jesus, a Babylonian ruler by the name of Hammurabi authored a code of laws. It is one of the earliest written examples that we have of the human attempt to define what is just or right. Other legal codes followed. Philosophers in Greece and Rome debated various ideals for a just society. As

Christians, we are the heirs of all these ideas, as well as the legal and prophetic tradition of ancient Israel found in the Bible. At the heart of the biblical tradition, however, is one very simple idea: justice is when the weak are protected against the strong, when the vulnerable are treated as fairly as the privileged. This is what Isaiah means when he says that the new leader who will come from the stump of Jesse will judge the poor with righteousness and “decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (v. 4).

In most ancient civilizations, government was the monarch. It was the rule of one rather than the rule of all. Thus, the prosperity of the nation and the well-being of the people depended on the righteousness or integrity of the ruler. According to Walter Brueggemann, Isaiah’s vision depends on what he calls a “primal conviction” in Israel (and the ancient Near East generally) that the role of the monarch was “to intervene in behalf of the poor and the vulnerable (especially widows and orphans) who are unable to supply their own social leverage.” Isaiah goes on to show that justice is defined not only by the legal tradition itself but also by how well the laws are administered. “He (that is, the just ruler) shall not judge by what his eyes

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see, or decide by what his ears hear” (Isa. 11:3). Once again, Brueggemann writes, “The king is to practice righteousness and equity that are not based on surface appearances, because a discerning ruler is not to be influenced by gestures of the wealthy or swayed by the manipulations of the powerful.”¹

As we reflect on this vision of justice that is the precondition for true peace, we are called to broaden the implications. Justice that protects the weak against the strong and judgment that guards against the influence of the powerful are not only values that we should expect from our government and the officials whom we choose who lead it. It is just as important to ask what the implications of this concept are for each of us

in our everyday lives. How does a parent deal equitably with children? How does a teacher not judge by appearances? How does an employer determine which employee needs what kind of oversight: who needs encouragement to use their own judgment and who needs detailed instructions? As citizens, we have both the right and the responsibility to choose those who govern us. How do we choose those who embody the values of protecting the weak against the strong and justice that truly is for all?

Making Changes

In the season of Advent, Christians are called to take some time away from the holiday aspect of this month and focus our hearts and minds on the coming of Christ into our world and into our lives. If Jesus is the one described by Isaiah's vision, how shall we prepare to welcome him once again and more deeply into our consciousness? John the Baptist says that we do this by repenting. That is to say, we need to recognize where our ways of behaving have diverged from God's path and turn around. Repentance is not just being sorry that we have messed up, however. Repentance is not regret or remorse. Repentance is not just saying a prayer of confession; it is about what you do after you have prayed.

Repentance means change. Literally, it means to "turn around." The metaphor suggests that we have not been walking on God's path and that we need to turn around and find our way back to the right way. "Bear fruits worthy of repentance," John says to the Pharisees (Luke 3:8). Only healthy trees can produce good, tasty fruit. Acts of justice and deeds of integrity can be done only by those whose hearts and minds are being conformed to God's intentions. In baptism, we were all anointed by the Holy Spirit—the Spirit described by Isaiah as the "spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." In baptism, we have been given God's own spirit to live inside of us so that we can (if we choose) learn God's path and live in ways that honor the God who is the author of justice and the giver of peace.

What does justice look like? In 1935, a building was built in Washington, DC, to house the Department of Justice. Between 1938 and 1941, sixty-one murals were commissioned and funded by the Public Works Arts Project. Each artist was asked to portray what justice

could and should look like. One mural was painted by Symeon Shimin, a Russian-born Jew who had immigrated to Brooklyn. It took him four years to complete the mural, and it can still be seen on the third floor of the building. It is titled "Contemporary Justice and the Child." On the left-hand side of the mural, Shimin portrays the brokenness of the nation. A long line of factories spew dark smoke into the sky. A crowd of poor people, all portrayed in grey, gaze vacantly at the viewer. In the foreground, two men are asleep, apparently curled up under a bridge or on a sidewalk. In the artist's mind, this is where justice is absent.

The right-hand side of the mural is in color and portrays images that suggest the reconstruction of American society. Women and men work together over blueprints. Brown hands hold building tools, decades before most African Americans enjoyed either fair employment opportunities or their constitutional rights to vote. Scientists, male and female, white and brown, work in labs, innovating a new future. And in the top right-hand corner, there is a green lawn and clean air with children at play. Finally, at the center of the mural, is a mother holding her child.²

If you want peace, work for justice. If you long for a world where all are respected, offer respect to all. If you want a world where the vulnerable are protected, speak up on their behalf. If you want to find hope in the midst of brokenness and despair, keep your eyes fixed on the vision of Isaiah and the promises of God. If you want your own life to flourish, bear fruit that gives evidence that you are finding your way back to God's path and to the way that is Jesus.

Notes

1. Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1–39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 100.
2. Casey Thornburgh Sigmon, "Isaiah 11:1–10," https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4316. Her essay provides a link to a reproduction of the mural on the website of the Vanderbilt Divinity School.

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