

Sermon 12.4.16

Pastor Josh Ferris

Second Sunday in Advent, Year A

Isaiah 11:1-10 | Psalm 72 | Romans 15:4-13 | Matthew 3:1-12

When I was growing up, every Saturday morning was when we cleaned the house together, usually my sister and my dad and me. And I know it sounds weird, but I have a lot of really good memories of cleaning the house with my family. It was actually fun. My dad would put on music and we would sing and dance. I realize now that this was a *brilliant* parenting trick to hide the fact that we were *cleaning*, but it totally worked. We had a blast as we listened to Bruce Springsteen, the Beatles, Bob Marley, Crosby Stills Nash & Young, and U2.

Now that I'm a dad, almost every night before bed I spend time with Penny listening to music, though she doesn't do a whole lot of cleaning. This week we were listening to U2's famous song, "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." It's a great song, but what blew my mind this week was an old video I found of the band singing it with a Gospel choir. The lead guitarist said that the song was intended to be a Gospel song, so when they heard about this church choir in Harlem singing it, they went and played with them. It was incredible.

The song is about a man who climbed mountains and searched throughout the earth, who chased after romance and everything the world had to offer. And the chorus repeated the words, "But I still haven't found what I'm looking for" over and over. At the end, Bono sings:

I believe in the Kingdom come
When all the colors will bleed into one
Bleed into one
But yes, I'm still running
You broke the bonds
And you loosed the chains
Carried the cross of my shame
You know I believe it

He's singing about Jesus. About faith. And yet he ends the song saying, "But I still haven't found what I'm looking for."

We're currently in the season of Advent, which is a time of waiting. A time of preparation. A time of *holy longing*, when we admit that we still haven't quite found what we're looking for. Maybe you feel that way sometimes – a longing, a yearning for something more, the recognition that something is missing, that this world isn't quite right. When I first started to follow Jesus, I thought that feeling a sense of longing meant that my faith wasn't strong enough or I wasn't following Jesus correctly. It took me a long time to recognize that *longing* can be an expression of our faith.

It's our faith that causes us to look at this world and to *long* for something different. We all feel it. We see war, we see injustice, we see disease and pain and suffering, we see division and hate, and things that are wrong, we experience these things and we *long* for a better world, another world. That *longing* is part of our faith. And what we're really longing for is God's kingdom.

Two thousand years ago, Jesus brought God's kingdom to earth. In our Gospel reading this morning, John the Baptist told people that through Jesus, "the kingdom of heaven has come near." (Matthew 3:2) Through his death and resurrection Jesus defeated sin and death and evil, and then he ascended into heaven, promising to come back again and fully establish God's kingdom here on earth. And he said that in the meantime we're supposed to keep doing the work that he started.

See, Jesus' ministry is incomplete. We're still waiting. It's like going out to eat, and ordering an appetizer. The appetizer is great, but it's just a taste, and it makes you excited to

get to the main course. You know the entrée is coming, but you don't know exactly when. We're living in that in-between time. Jesus did something incredible two thousand years ago, but we're still waiting for the feast to come. In Jesus we've found the truth, but we still feel longing. We still haven't fully found what we're looking for.

We're still waiting for God's kingdom.

Throughout Advent, our readings from Isaiah tell us about what God's kingdom is like. Last week we heard that it is a place of peace. And this week Isaiah tells us that God's kingdom is one built on justice.

We often think of justice as punishing those who do wrong, but that's not primarily what justice means in God's kingdom. For God, *justice* is more about lifting up those who have been mistreated and making things right for those who are wronged. That's why the Bible talks so much about those who are oppressed and marginalized and poor, because those are the people most vulnerable to being mistreated, the people who are most in need of justice, of being lifted up, of having wrongs made right. Isaiah told people that justice means rescuing the oppressed, defending orphans, and caring for widows. (1:17) He said that justice is good news for the poor and the meek, and that God is glorified by justice. (5:18-23)

And when Jesus came, he showed what God's justice looks like. He spent time with the poor – in fact, he was born poor to a family of peasants. Soon after, he became an immigrant as his family fled from violence. When he started his ministry, he told people he came to bring good news to the poor, to release those held captive, and to set the oppressed free. (Luke 4:18) He taught that how we treat those people who are considered to be least, lost, and overlooked is a measure of how much we love him. (Matthew 25:31-46) He reached out to heal the sick

and feed the hungry. He loved marginalized and hated people like tax collectors, adulterers, and lepers. He welcomed foreigners and migrants. He spoke out against religious systems that put undue burdens on people and unjust political systems that oppressed people with the threat of violence. He lifted up women and children in a culture that sought to hold them down. He proclaimed that the poor and the meek and the lowly are blessed, that those who are mocked have a better seat at the table, that in God's kingdom the mighty are made low while the weak and small are lifted up.

Jesus showed us that God cares about justice. That God sees the wrong done in this world – including the wrong done to you – and that God's kingdom is a place where wrong is made right. And Jesus showed us that seeking after and creating a more just world is central to our faith as his followers. Dr. Cornel West, who teaches at Union Theological Seminary, put it this way: "Never forget that justice is what love looks like in public."

We can see what justice looks like in today's reading. Isaiah says God's kingdom is a place where wolves live with lambs and leopards lie down with sheep without fear. In God's kingdom, people stop being opposed to one another. They stop trying to compete with one another or defeat one another or have more than one another, and instead live in harmony.

And so as people who live in God's kingdom, these are questions for us to consider: How can you live in harmony with others? How can you live in a way that ensures others have enough – and do something about it when they don't? How can you stop seeing life as a competition for resources or opportunities or power, and instead offer those things to other people? How can you lift up those who are down, and help make things right for those who are wronged? How can we bring about a more just world for everyone?

To be honest, most of us this morning don't *need* to care very much about issues of justice, because they don't affect us. Yes, all of us have wrong done to us, and I don't mean to minimize or ignore or excuse that. But we live in an area where most people have more than enough, we have nice houses, and the best schools, and very little crime. For almost all of us, the color of our skin or the gender of the person we love has never caused anyone to treat us differently. And because of this, it's easy to be apathetic, or to think that we already know everything about what others go through simply because of our own experiences.

But neither apathy nor ignoring the voices and experiences of other people is a Christian way to live. Our faith does not allow us to not care about something simply because it doesn't affect us or to dismiss something just because it makes us uncomfortable.

That's not love. That's not justice.

Cries for justice often come from strange places. A voice in the wilderness wearing clothes made of camel hair telling us to repent and live more just lives. A man marching to a nation's capital and saying he has a dream. A movement crying out for us to pay attention to the way black people are treated in this country. Scientists warning that if we continue to mistreat God's creation, there will be consequences. Hard-working people across our country struggling to get by while the gap between rich and poor grows larger. Neighbors who are different from us sharing that they feel unsafe and are scared. A family of refugees, not so different than Jesus' own, crying out for a safe place in the midst of violence.

We don't need to have all the answers to these problems, though when we see opportunities to help bring justice and right wrongs through our words and actions, we should

do so. But more than that, we must acknowledge that our faith calls us to stand right where Jesus stood – with the poor, meek, marginalized, and oppressed of the world.

Perhaps the holiest thing we can do during this Advent season is to intentionally seek out and listen to those who are different from us. Maybe it's someone who has a different skin color, or lives in a different neighborhood, or practices another faith, or is homeless, or who is struggling to get by. Find an opportunity to listen and to learn. Be attentive to the *holy longing* that you – and others – feel for a better world, for God's kingdom, for justice, because that is the Holy Spirit within us, stirring us up and calling us to pay attention, to listen, to pray, to act as we keep waiting for God's kingdom, when we will *all* find what we're looking for. Amen.