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Saint George's Episcopal Church, Arlington, Virginia
The Second Sunday of Advent
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*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding... Isaiah 11: 1-10*

This past Thursday, the people of South Africa and people around the world went into mourning after the death of Nelson Mandela. We remember him for who he was and for all he represented. We celebrate him because of the vision that he held out of the peaceable kingdom, where “the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid.” After years of activism, years and years of working for justice, Mandela, Madiba as he is known to many South Africans, was imprisoned and forced to do hard labor for 27 years. And yet after all of that, he emerged from prison, was elected the first black president of his country and brought a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a profoundly generous spirit of reconciliation. And that spirit, more than anything, is why is so touched us.

It is hard for us to imagine, after enduring years of suffering, how he could look out of his tiny cell window at Robben Island with such hopeful eyes.

As we look at the world around us, what do we see? We see death and destruction, we see wars and famine, we see poverty and desperation. We see ever-increasing polarization and demonization in both our civic and religious

discourse. If we judge only by what our eyes see, without a faith lens to filter and interpret the word around us, it is a very bleak picture indeed.

The prophet Isaiah had every reason to despair for himself and for his people. He writes his vision of “a shoot coming out from the stump of Jesse” during a time when there are no visible signs of life. He and his people the Israelites are at war. There is no peace. There is no understanding. There is no conversation. And yet, from this barren landscape he envisions a time when “the wolf shall live with the lamb...and a little child shall lead them..”

It is a beautiful thing to behold someone who is a hopeful presence in a hopeless world. It is a rare and blessed sight. Someone who holds out that vision of possibility and newness when others around them see only “the facts on the ground.” Nelson Mandela saw the possibility for blacks and whites living in the peaceable kingdom during apartheid. Isaiah saw life when death was all around him. That way of looking at things requires a certain kind of sight.

This season of Advent calls us to live as people of hope, looking forward with Isaiah to that day when all of humankind will be in harmony with God and with one another. Christians are called to be agents of reconciliation in a hurting world. And we know as limited human beings that try as we might, we cannot change the world alone. Our efforts have to be in a larger context. We are a people called by our baptismal covenant to work for justice and honor the dignity of every human being, but if we do that trusting only in our own resolve, we will ultimately fail. It is God working in us and all around us

who is the ultimate source of our hope for a broken and hurting world. Otherwise, we just become bitter, hardened and exhausted by our own efforts. Relying on God, being people of prayer and discernment, gives us limitless and inexhaustible power and resolve to continue to work for the peaceable kingdom that Isaiah envisioned so long ago.

When we hear Isaiah's poetic longing for a righteous ruler, anointed by God to usher in the peaceable kingdom, we know that that longing for us is met in Jesus and that in this time between Jesus' earthly ministry and the final consummation of God's reign, we live expectantly.

Advent is a season of great expectations. It offers us, if we have eyes to see and embrace the opportunity, a fresh start on the path of hopefulness. As people of faith we understand ourselves as people who are always in the process of becoming, always being renewed. We know that we are part of a universe infused with mystery and infinite possibility, imbued by our Creator with the capacity for forgiveness, for reconciliation, for working with God to usher in the peaceable kingdom where "the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp" without being endangered.

Nelson Mandela worked his entire adult life to fulfill a vision, a vision that was never fully realized. He says this in his autobiography. "When I walked out of prison, that was my mission, to liberate the oppressed and oppressor both." "The truth is that we are not yet free...We have not taken the final step on a longer and even more difficult road. For to be free is not merely to cast off

one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others."

As Christians, we know that the ultimate fulfillment of God's dream for the world will be fulfilled at a time of God's choosing, but in the meantime, there is much work to be done. And the way we do it makes all the difference. We go about living into the peaceable kingdom with hopefulness rather than despair, with resolve rather than resignation, with faith animating all we do.

*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...*

Resources:

1. Feasting on the Word, Year A Volume 1. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, Isaiah 11: 1-10, exegetical perspective, Bruce C. Birch, pp. 27-31.
2. Washington Post, Friday, Dec 6th, 2013, "The Prisoner Who Became President," by Sudarsan Raghavan and Lynne Duke.