

SERMON: "WHAT DO YOU EXPECT ... RIGHTEOUSNESS"
TEXTS: NEW TESTAMENT MATTHEW 3:1-12
OLD TESTAMENT ISAIAH 11:1-9

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INTRODUCTION

You remember postcards. I imagine they are still around.

Guess with cellphones ever present there is not the market for postcards these days I remember sending a few and getting more than a few. There was a trend.

Every church I served before this one has been part of that trend

At least one good humored person from each of those churches took time to send me a postcard while they were on vacation, on a cruise in the Caribbean.

The postcards were from one town in particular in the Cayman Islands.

The postcards I got from church members looked like this one

Show Image – Postcard from Hell

I appreciate a church with a sense of humor ... people sending the pastor a postcard from hell. I get it. Got several postcards from there

Any of you ever been there? That town in the Cayman Islands?

Any of you ever been there ... or maybe to the town in Michigan with the same rather unique name? Ever been to hell not just geographically, but ... you know actually ... you ever been through hell?

As you think about that, about those tough times, those struggles both in your own life and in the world we live in (our history isn't just a list of heroes and victories and achievements) ... let me give you some points of reference. One from Dante's Inferno and what the poet called "The Divine Comedy." Interesting title, isn't it?

Perhaps the most well-known line from that epic poem (did you study it in school?) is what Dante says about the entrance into hell and what is posted there. Here is what that sign on the gates of hell might look like

Show image – Abandon Hope

"Abandon hope, all ye who enter here."

When I ask you if you've ever been to or through hell, I'm asking a question about hope, about times you've may have given up on hope ... abandoned it.

I'm not asking the question to pry, certainly not to be judgmental I'm asking because I think we've all been there ... or been close

EXPECT THIS

I've never been there, to or through there ... but I've been close
I've felt the darkness closing in, the hopefulness slipping away
I've felt the cynicism creeping in. I know I'm not alone in feeling that way.

Answering the question about how close to hell we may have been (or may be now)
is meant to be a soul-searching exercise, not some ranking process
between teams, nations or peoples like some college football poll
Nor is it meant to be just about me (singular). It is very much about we (plural)

Example. One of the things that breaks my heart in our day and time
is the cynicism of our politics, the false equivalents, the dismissive claim
that "they," whoever they are, are all corrupt or greedy or just boys being boys
We seem to be letting all our leaders off the hook by thinking that
they all are tainted by the power that corrupts. We don't expect any better

It is to a people in such a time and place that the prophet's words are addressed
The prophet counters that cynicism with "You can expect better, expect this ..."
And, in particular, you can expect this of the leader that God is sending

**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, the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be
in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see or
decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge
for the poor and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath
of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt
around his waist and faithfulness the belt around his loins.**

The prophet points to what God has planned for the people.
That is hope ... and it is a defiant hope. It points beyond the darkness of the day
to the promise of a God-given tomorrow. It is defiant because it will not settle
for more of the same, it will not give in to the cynicism or give up on hope.

Show image – Hope Is Defiant

At that time, the leaders they knew were either their own leaders who failed
to hear or heed the call of the prophets to change their ways, to repent ...
or the leaders of other nations that would overthrow them and oppress them
They probably expected more of the same – different names
but still the same. Cynicism has been around for a long, long time.

It would be a defiant hope to claim that the day would soon come when
the one who leads them would "with righteousness judge for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed of the earth."

THE PEACABLE KINGDOM

But this isn't just about a future leader, it's about the future ... a much better future one where that kind of righteous (not self-righteous) leadership takes root (from a stump mind you) and blossoms into a scene almost unbelievable, one captured by many artists including a print that hangs in my study, that my mom gave me – the peaceable kingdom

The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the lion will feed together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

It is quite the picture – predator and prey together in peace
Wolf and lamb, leopard and kid (goat), calf and bear
And not only that ... but children, infants playing over the hole of the snake
“You kids go out and play.” Heard that plenty of times. Said it plenty
but never, “You kids go outside and play with the poisonous snakes.”

The prophet dared the Israelites and dares us to envision that
and not just to paint that picture in our heads like some kind of
“wouldn't it be nice.” The prophet calls us to believe it as God's plan
and God's promise. This is the hope we cannot abandon.

In this season of Advent expectation, we look not just to Christmas, but to Christ
He is this righteous leader that branched out of the stump of Jesse
He is the one who inaugurates this peaceable kingdom
In the December darkness, in the darkness of these days
In the darkness, whatever day ... we hold onto and are held by this hope

That includes those days when we feel as if we are closer to hell than heaven
It is especially on those days when hope might seem easy to abandon
the burden too heavy, the news too bad for too long. It is on those days
when the Holy Spirit draws our attention from the sign that Dante saw posted
on hell's gates to the sign that God painted with wolf and lamb, cow and bear

Show image – Peaceable Kingdom 2

I do like how we have come to call this image painted by the prophet
and then by many an artist ‘the peaceable kingdom.’
We don't call it the peaceful kingdom as in peace – full. Full of peace
Could easily call it that. It is full of all sorts of creatures at peace
It is a wide-screen group photo. Peaceful. Full of peace

But over time, we have come to call it the peaceable kingdom
I like that so very much better. It is rather hopeful, defiantly hopeful

SUMMARY

This image, the one I am saying makes a great counterpoint to Dante's sign
We call peaceable ... as in peace able. Able as in can happen and will happen
Peace is possible. It is possible.

You know one of the family traits passed down to me,
one that I have passed down to all my kids ... is stubbornness
Perhaps that trait might run in your family as well

Well stubbornness can have its downside. It has an upside too
Really comes in handy when I watch, listen to or read the news
and the cynic in me starts to bubble up like the Grinch looking down
at all the Whos down in Whoville getting ready for Christmas
and starting to hate Christmas.

When that cynicism turns me as green as the Grinch
I look up at that image that Isaiah painted with words,
Edward Hicks and others painted with a brush
And my mom gave to her son the preacher – The peace-able kingdom

That fills me with a needed dose of hope – defiant, even stubborn hope

God is at work making peace possible. I see it. I see it all over the place
I see it in all sorts of places ... including on the outskirts of hell itself.