

Peace (and Judgement) in the Valley

Advent IIA + Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12 + Rev. Rob Shearer + A Sermon For Every Sunday (2025)

I don't know if y'all know that old, old gospel song, *Peace in the Valley*, penned by the Rev. Thomas A. Dorsey, the father of modern African American gospel music. Perhaps you're familiar with the version that Elvis sang on the Ed Sullivan Show, or maybe you know the one by the late, great queer gospel singer Sr. Rosetta Tharpe.

If you don't know it, please indulge me, if you will – and sing along if you do:

[singing] Well the bear will be gentle, and the wolf will be tame,
And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh, yeah;
And the beast from the wild, shall be led by a child
And I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh, yeah.

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day;
There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray;
There'll be no sadness, no sorrow, No no no trouble, trouble I see;
There will be peace in the valley for me, oh yeah.

[pause] Sometimes I worry that we, Church, too easily give up our birthright as purveyors of hope. That in our own uncertainties, we downplay the blessed assurance we have that another world, that a peaceable world like the one that Rev. Dorsey sang about, is, in spite of the evidence, indeed possible.

Rev. Dorsey wrote that song, of course, based on the ancient Hebrew prophet Isaiah's words from today's reading. And in telling the story of how that song came to be, Dorsey said this: "It was just before Hitler sent his war chariots into Western Europe in the late 1930s. I was on a train going through southern Indiana and saw horses, cows and sheep all grazing together in this little valley. Everything seemed so peaceful. It made me question, "What's the matter with [hum]mankind? Why can't [we] live in peace?" [pause]

We, too, live in troubled times. Some have gone so far as to use the term *polycrisis* to describe our current situation – *where* crisis upon crisis; political, ecological, economic, social – all compound each other. One pastor, recently pepper sprayed as he peacefully protested at an ICE facility goes so far as call what is happening a 'spiritual emergency' (Rev. Michael Wolff).

And so it is, in these far too mean, polarized, hard-to-make-ends-meet days - when authoritarianism is on the rise, empathy mocked, and when truth just ain't what it used to be – that we all could use could a little more *peace in the valley*. [pause]

But peace, our scriptures imply, is not easy. Just like reconciliation can only come after truth-telling, peace, friends, only comes after a reckoning, an owning of what is broken. And that, our scriptures imply, comes with judgement.

I don't know about you, but it feels to me like the more privilege and means we might have, the more we tend resist and get antsy around that language of repentance and judgement.

But there's just no way to get around it in today's scriptures. Sure, the preacher might choose to focus in on Isaiah's incredible image of creational reconciliation; the wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, calf and lion and fatling all hanging out and led – no, not by a warrior king – but by a little child – and, sure, that's OK. But I also think it's wise for us to take heed that in Isaiah's vision, and, indeed, in the depiction of John the Baptist in our gospel reading, *judgement* is a part of how we get there.

Advent is, of course, a time that our readings tend to focus on apocalypse – a Greek word which simply means the great revealing or uncovering to happen before a time of judgement and reconciliation. The season of Advent was, way back, seen by the church as a mirror season to Lent. Advent, like Lent, was once 40 days long – and both seasons had violet or purple for their liturgical colour, as some communities still do. Lent, of course, is a time of repentance – a time to turn and face the reality of the violence in us – and Advent still has those undertones, too, if we'll listen deeply.

So – what if, in spite of our resistance to it, judgment is actually 'good news'? What if God's judgement is a necessary part of that great revealing – no, not as some petty wrath or vengeance – but, for liberation – as the prophet says: 'for the *meek of the earth*.'

And let's be realistic – in order to get to the consummation of that so-called peaceable kingdom there needs to be an accounting for what is wrong. For those persons and groups and systems who (again using Isaiah's words) '*hurt or destroy*'... our scriptures infer that there must be a purgation.

There needs to be a reckoning with those parts of us, individually and collectively, that are prone to violence, to power-over another, to sin. And I say *us* rather than *them* because, no matter how I might want to point a finger – my fellow Canadian Bruce Cockburn once sang "Everybody loves to see / justice done on somebody else" – the good Lord knows we all need that liberation from sin. Even ol' Rev. Dorsey, in his song, speaks of being "changed from the creature" that he is.

And so it is, that the messiah is predicted, no, not merely as meek and mild in a manger – but as a farmer doing what's known as wind winnowing, lifting up the fork so the usable grain falls to the barn floor to be collected and later baked in into beautiful bread for a divine feast – while the lighter chaff is put aside and burned off – or if the story were written today, maybe it'd be composted. These passages aren't always easy. I think many of us have these scripts of eternal damnation of the individual that we overlay onto these words – and so when we hear of the language of unquenchable fire – our minds, well, go to hell. Lord as my witness, I'm not advocating for that read.

Yet still, this messiah does come, axe in hand, we're told, to prune the vineyard. And why? So that all creation can 'live in harmony' as St. Paul says in today's reading to the community at Rome – and to live in the freedom and grace to glorify God! [pause]

Years ago, I was sitting at a campfire in British Columbia where I live with a Cree friend of mine – and as we talked about shalom, he stressed to me the indigenous teachings of his Nation around harmony... the Cree word (ᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦᑭᑦ miyo-wicéhtowin) for which is me-oh-way-weh-chew-in. That's a notion that's perhaps akin to what Cherokee Christian teacher Dr. Randy Woodley calls 'the harmony way'.

And in these times, it's important for us to note that Isaiah's depiction of the peaceable kingdom is not just focused on us humans, but on the whole created order – the *community of creation* as Randy would call it.

So, in a time where so much is broken, where nothing works, where the God-given image of each person is selectively ignored by those in power, where even children are deliberate targets of war and terror, where the earth is under siege we, Church, have a different Story to tell. A harmony story.

And this harmony, this shalom, this peace in the valley is the culmination of the story of Jesus; that child that leads us. *This*, friends, is our story and *this* is our song. Let us, therefore, again heed the words of Paul in today's reading, to not forget our story – to not neglect the “encouragement of the scriptures that we might have hope [and] live in harmony.” (Romans)

This story is coming to be in this uncovering, the great revealing of the very heart of God – a God who is not a wrathful or petty judge, but one who longs that there be no more pain, sorrow or destruction. In these birth-pangs, in this refining fire within which we live, we audaciously continue to tell our Story of hope. We do not cease to tell the story of God come in Jesus.

And so it is that the prophets of old called us to make a way for a messiah – born of the line of Jesse through Mary, we, too, make a way for One who shall, indeed, finally put the world to rights – so that there may, once and for all, be peace in the valley.

And so, friends, if you'll indulge me one more time, I'll end today with a song whose words go back some 1200 years – reminding us of our sacred task to be purveyors of hope in times of crisis:

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse, free
Thine own from Satan's tyranny;
From depths of hell Thy people save,
And give them victory o'er the grave. [sing with me]
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel.

May it be so. *Amen.*