

A Shoot Shall Rise: Becoming People Of Peace

Sermon for the Second Sunday of Advent, 2025

Dr. C. Cavanagh

December 7th, 2025

In 2024, after unexpectedly torrential rains that dropped the equivalent of five years worth of water on the Sahara in the span of a month, something astonishing happened: the Sahara turned green. So green, in fact, that satellites in space could detect the change!

My first thought was: the Sahara — nothing but sand for decades — turns green after one good month of rain. Meanwhile, I can water a houseplant faithfully for weeks, and still lose the battle!

But humour aside, those years of drought did not stop the seeds buried there. They waited. They endured. And when the right nourishment finally came, they flourished. That image came to me as I read this morning's passage from Isaiah — a green shoot pushing its way out of something old and seemingly dead. How beautiful. How impossible!

We know that feeling too. In the depth of winter, when trees are stripped bare and everything is frozen, it is hard to imagine anything could ever grow again. And yet, every spring proves us wrong. However bleak the present moment, hope lies ahead.

Isaiah's vision speaks powerfully to our time. We live in a difficult era — an age of ecological crisis, rising totalitarianism, and violent conflicts. But we also live in a time when people still fall in love, care for one another, and stand up to injustice. There are seeds here — seeds of hope, seeds of peace — waiting in the dark soil of collective possibilities for nourishment to draw them into the light.

Isaiah's World — and Ours

Isaiah lived in a difficult time too. Around 720 BCE, the Hebrew people were divided into two Kingdoms, Israel and Judah. Now Israel to the north had been captured by the Assyrian Empire. Isaiah lived in the kingdom of Judah to the South where Jerusalem was located, and he was a spiritual advisor to the King.

It was an anxious time as Judah lived under the shadow of this powerful and threatening neighbour who was making noises about taking them over. (Not that we would know anything about what that is like!)

Isaiah was concerned with the spiritual health of Judah at this time. On top of the external threat he saw a deeper internal threat: leaders who no longer cared for the outcasts — widows, orphans, or immigrants; a society losing its compassionate coherence. There was no solidarity and no true peace.

In the passage we read today, Isaiah is crying out to the leaders of his time. Imagine him before the throne in Judah. He throws at the rulers imagery that calls on them to imagine a world bigger than themselves, better than what it is. He reminds them of God's ancient call to justice, mercy, and peace. But he doesn't just tell them about it — he wants them to imagine it, and to feel it.

The whole passage we heard just showers us with poetic metaphors for peace. He's got wolves lying down with lambs, and babies playing with cobras. It's not intended to be factual. It's intended to show us ***what peace feels like***. Like water falling on desert sand, he tries to make something grow in a challenging environment.

The Green Shoot — and Our Becoming

The first metaphor Isaiah introduces is not an image of power, but of vulnerability: a tiny, fragile shoot rising from a stump. It is an image of the Messiah — humble, small, easily bruised, in contrast to the kings of his time. He writes this of course hundreds of years before Christ's birth. But it speaks to all time. It tells us that our vulnerability is not something to be afraid of. It allows us to grow. And it is necessary for peace.

It's not easy to be vulnerable and let our guard down. Maybe we'll say the wrong thing; maybe we'll be judged.

Our vulnerability allows us to experience empathy with others. It allows us to reach across differences and make friends and build good relationships. It's like breaking through the hard outer shell of a seed, and allowing ourselves, despite the risk, to grow, and to become *more*.

Mary understood this. Despite the risks, she lowered her defenses and said **yes** to God. And I'm sure she had fears! But despite her vulnerability, she could imagine all the most wonderful possibilities as well. So she became a dwelling place for Christ. What about us? Will we risk carrying God? Can we, like Isaiah, like Mary, imagine a better world — one of justice and peace?

Peace

Now the word *peace* can be used in a lot of different ways. We say for instance that

Canada is at peace because we are not currently being attacked by a foreign nation. We also might say we're at peace with a decision.

Isaiah understood peace according to the ancient Hebrew concept of *Shalom*, or *Salaam* in Arabic. According to theologian Cornelius Plantinga Jr, Shalom is:

“The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight ... We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or a cease-fire between enemies. Shalom ... is the way things ought to be.”¹

When we talk about Advent peace or the Peace of Christ, *that* is what we're talking about. Think about it — the *webbing* together of all creation — that means it's *all* of us, interconnected. We cannot turn a blind eye to suffering anywhere, because when we do, we are turning our backs on all of creation. Our call as followers of Christ, as people on a pilgrimage to Bethlehem, is to keep at the work of creating more shalom for everyone.

We can do that with the gifts of the Holy Spirit that Isaiah mentions: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and awe (translated as “fear of the Lord” in this reading). These gifts are like rainwater, irrigating even the driest desert. When we absorb them, we find more shalom, more of all the ways we think of peace. We find more:

- Peace within ourselves, because we act with more integrity and courage.
- Peace with others, because we develop non-violent relationships grounded in justice, safety, and compassion.
- Peace with God, because we discover more moments of awe — a candle's glow, a child's breath, a star hanging low in the night.

Mary knew about Shalom. By the time she came along, the ancient understanding of Shalom was being challenged by a false description of peace, called the Pax Romana. That was a false peace imposed by the Roman occupation and their soldiers. It looked like peace to the Romans, but not to the oppressed Jews and Arabs of the time. They were colonized, dehumanized, and completely controlled by their oppressors.

But despite it all, Mary could imagine a better world, enough to say “**Here I am**” to the God of Shalom. And so she brought into the world the Pax Christi, which is the Peace of Christ, or Shalom itself.

¹ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 10

The world still suffers from Pax Romana in many places. There are Herods still. Bethlehem is again under occupation. Ukraine and Sudan and so many other places suffer. And as Tara reminded us in our scripture reading, people who speak their dreams of peace and justice out loud face deepening risks all over the world.

Will we, like Mary or Isaiah before her, raise prophetic voices across borders, across oceans, across fear? When others, even in far off places cannot speak, will we say, “Here I am”?

Prophetic Imagination — Seeing Beyond What Is

Mary and Isaiah had what theologian Walter Brueggemann calls a prophetic imagination. They could see a different way for the world to be, a world of justice and peace for all.

The prophetic imagination has always been necessary to make the seemingly impossible possible. And it does. Indigenous elders who dreamed of a time when Residential schools would close, made that dream possible. And Martin Luther King, Jr – remember his famous speech – “I have a dream”. He dreamed of a nation of equals, and then together with others they worked for it.

So let us dream my friends. Let us walk in the footsteps of Isaiah, and Mary, and Martin Luther King Jr, and all those prophets who have dared to dream of a world of justice and peace and compassion, and then let us make those dreams come true.

We may be nothing but tender green shoots, trying to reach for the light. But little shoots of green can grow. They can be tenacious, like the weeds in my garden that I can’t get rid of.

We do not need to be perfect to begin. The little sprout after all grew from a stump, something that had been cut down, humbled, and laid bare. Don’t think your gifts or your voice are not enough for this world. You are God’s child. You are more than enough. And you do not walk alone.

Together let us walk to the manger. Bethlehem is not just a destination, it’s a summons. It is a call to become the people Isaiah dreamed of — people who refuse the easy paths of fear. People who choose the courageous way of peace.

People who see injustice and say, “Not anymore.”

Amen