

Help Is On The Way

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Lord Jesus, give us your peace that passes understanding today. Help us to see you clearly, and wait for you expectantly.

We want peace in the world, an end to violence and bloodshed, and we also need inner peace. In this time of so much anxiety all around, where do we look for peace?

Imagine you wake in the night to hear a burglar creeping into your house. Trying not to panic, you reach for your cellphone and dial 911. The voice on the other end of the line quickly gets your information. Imagine if they then said, "Okay, we have heard your side, so over the next few hours, we'll be assembling a team to investigate. To get a complete picture of what's happening there, we'll need to talk to the burglar too, could you put him on the line for a minute? We understand you're feeling worried, but we don't want to judge the situation too hastily, we want to listen to everyone carefully." No! You want them to say that they will be there right away with their police dogs, that they will break down the door if necessary, that they will rescue you and capture the burglar.

I had a friend who was a paramedic and volunteer fireman. I asked him what he said when the 911 calls came in. How did that conversation with a desperate person go? He told me the words that he ended every single call with: "Help is on the way." That's what we need to hear. We may be in danger, but help is on the way. Right now in December of 2022, we know that Jesus Christ is already present here with us, and he has promised absolutely that he will never leave us or forsake us. But during Advent, we go back in time in our mind's eye. We think with relief of the Messiah about to come, and we also look forward to his second coming. We hear God's voice promising: "Help is on the way."

How does God help us? What is God's response to the evil that, like a burglar, is creeping in to harm us? Today's Scriptures show us two sides of a coin: strong judgment of wickedness, and the result: peace. To have that peace, there's got to be a plumbline: we have to see clearly what is evil, and the evil must be dealt with. Our culture tells us that there **is** no plumbline. You hear things like this: "We shouldn't judge. We each have to find our own truth." Our culture tells us that judging things is wrong, even cruel. The idea is that if we could just get rid of people judging so much, all would be peace and light. We hear things like this: "Don't be so judgmental!" or "Whatever they do is their own business, I won't judge anyone." But the truth is, that **justice** comes through right judgment. No justice -- no peace. So if we get rid of our plumbline of what's right and wrong, we accidentally get rid of peace at the same time.

Deep down, we know and agree about this even when different opinions about all sorts of things seem to divide us. We know that Martin Luther King changed our country for the better by insisting that racial discrimination was morally wrong. No ambiguity. Same with Nelson Mandela in South Africa. Same with Volodymyr Zelensky in the Ukraine: he declared that the violent aggression of Putin was wrong, and we agreed. Same with Mother Theresa in India -- the list goes on.

So, the question is, how can we know how to judge properly, according to God's standards? Do you remember how the children of Israel decided what was right and wrong in the book of Judges? The last verse of the book sums it up, 'In those days there was no king in Israel: **every man did that which was right in his own eyes.**' The results were disastrous: crazy and violent. The lesson? We can't rely on our own personal intuition of what is right, or of what we think makes us **feel** closer to God. The truth is, we are not unbiased. We accidentally slip into thinking that what suits us best is right. Do you remember the Romans passage from last Sunday? We were instructed to 'make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.' So we are **not** to be steered by our own desires. **What we want** is not the plumbline. This means that we will **all** have desires that are actually to **remain ungratified** -- and that's something our culture tells us will harm us. But that's a lie. If we want peace -- that peace that passes understanding -- it's **never** going to come from following the endless string of our own desires. It only comes from trusting God's wisdom above our own. As Christians, we are marching to the beat of a different drummer. We belong to God; our bodies belong to God; and in serving God, in following his commands, we find perfect freedom.

The situation for the Israelites, in the time of the Judges, was a mess. We can identify with that! We can see that this world today is a mess because humans are seeking their **own** will, and their **own** truth. But in today's reading from Isaiah, there's a wonderful vision. We see what it will look like when Jesus, the Messiah, comes back again. We find out that he is going to judge differently from the people in the book of Judges. They did what was right **in their own eyes**. By contrast, the prophet Isaiah says about the Messiah: '**he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes**, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears, but with **righteousness** shall he judge the poor.' What does it look like when there is a king who judges rightly, rather than just doing whatever seems right in his own eyes?

Let's take the example of Solomon. The psalm we read today was King David's last prayer. It's the prayer of a king asking for help to judge rightly. David prays for himself and for his son Solomon. The Psalm begins, 'Give the king thy judgments, O God, and thy righteousness unto the king's son. He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment.'

So, let's take a look at Solomon. You remember the landmark case that is always told as proof of how wise Solomon was. There are two women with newborns, and one rolls onto her baby at night, accidentally smothering it. She switches out the babies and takes the live one, and puts her dead baby next to the other woman. The two women are coming before the king arguing about whose baby the live baby is. Solomon doesn't say, 'Let's all live happily together, you can both take care of the baby, let's just all love each other and work together.' No -- to our horror, he commands the live baby to be cut in half, and each woman to be given half. But that righteous judgment unveils the truth: the woman whose baby is still alive would rather the baby remain alive and be cared for by her rival than be killed. In this way, Solomon uncovers the true mother. That story shows us that there is nothing sentimental, there's no scent of compromise, in the king's righteous judging. It has an edge to it. But it brings justice. The child is saved from a woman who is not its mother, a woman who clearly doesn't have the child's interests at heart -- if you think of it, she would rather see it dead than not have it herself. And the true mother receives her precious child back, unharmed.

And so what happens when the king judges rightly? Harm is removed. The vulnerable are protected. In Isaiah, we immediately see the promise of peace that will follow from righteous judgment: it's that beautiful vision of the lion and the lamb together, and a little child leading the peaceful animals. No more harm: 'They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.' Isaiah promises us that we can trust God even when it seems like the world is falling apart -- and it often does seem that way, doesn't it? We can trust God, because in the Messiah, help is on the way. Because he will judge rightly, harm will be banished.

When we look at Matthew's gospel, we see John the Baptist's fierce vision of righteous judgment. I often think of John the Baptist with awe and admiration. He was really a tough person. Dressed in camel's hair, surviving in the wild on locust and honey. I don't think I could do that! Especially the locust part. Then, when he is in front of the king, who has taken his brother's wife -- I don't know about you, but I think I might have been tempted to skip the topic altogether, with a king who could cut my head off if he wanted; or perhaps I might make a timid reference to the fact that his marriage situation is not ideal. ("It's none of my business what goes on in other peoples' bedrooms" -- isn't that what people say these days?) But no -- that's not John the Baptist! He says, "Hey, you're committing adultery." If you know John the Baptist from that story, you probably aren't surprised to hear his clear voice in today's gospel reading. He says, 'The axe is laid unto the root of the trees: therefore every tree which brings not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire.' And listen to what John the Baptist says the Messiah, the one who is supposed to help us, is going to do! No image of Jesus looking on lovingly **no matter what we do**. (This is the Messiah who will turn over tables in the temple, driving out those who are exploiting the poor.) John the Baptist says this Messiah will purge his threshing floor, gather up the wheat, and burn up the chaff, the wicked, with unquenchable fire! In other words, the Messiah will judge the wicked with righteous judgment.

We then need to turn back to our Old Testament readings to remember how the picture is completed, what will follow this righteous judgment that John the Baptist is talking about. From Isaiah, we saw the beautiful picture of all the peaceful animals led by a little child -- peace, and **no more harm**. And now we realize that our psalm today is ultimately talking, not just about David or Solomon, but about Jesus himself. Jesus is the one who will break in pieces the oppressor; and it is **also** Jesus who will make the righteous flourish and will bring peace. It is Jesus' name that all the nations of the earth will call blessed.

In closing, I'd like to ask you: What is your 911 call today? What are the things in your life that seem like they are falling apart and hopeless? Is there a place in our lives where we can stop looking with our own eyes, stop trusting in our own wisdom, and trust God instead? Trust God even when it seems like the world is falling apart. Trust God's truth and God's promises. Take time to apply them to our own lives by carefully reading Scripture each day and asking for God's help to 'inwardly digest' what we read. We can listen to John the Baptist's warning voice and turn away from doing wrong. And especially during advent, when we not only think **back** to Christ's birth, but also look **forward** to his coming again, we can listen to God's voice telling us -- hold on -- 'Help is on the way' -- the one who will set everything to rights is on the way -- the Prince of Peace is on his way.