

Summary:

“Make The Nations Prove: Peaceful Joy,” the fourth in our series for Advent, “Heaven and Nature Sing,” by Rev. Jay Anderson at Church of the Master United Methodist, Westerville, Ohio, Sunday, December 22, 2019

Detail:

Gayle Boss, in her book *All Creation Waits: The Advent Mystery of New Beginnings*, in each chapter describes the way various animals adapts to winter—with the loss of heat and light. One chapter describes the life cycle of a firefly.

Did you know that the common Eastern firefly dies off every year? But, in a sense, their little lights never cease. Because a firefly egg, buried deep in the ground, gives off a faint glow. And after only two weeks it will hatch and the little red larvae will radiate a soft constant glow. Far beneath our feet, they have spent the winter months crawling through the soil, eating and growing.

“When it senses it has grown fully,” she writes, “a larva will construct a sort of mud cave for itself in the soil.

It will lie in the cave, glowing and still, while every part of its body melts and is remade.

It will have crawled through the dark earth for more than three hundred days to be made ready for a transformation that happens in ten or twelve.

A new creature, nothing like a worm, will push out of its cave, dig, and break above ground.

It will rest a moment and breathe, then rise on fresh wings, its light, long hidden, released to dance through the wide nights of summertime.”

This quiet and persistent light of the firefly is something like the peaceful joy we celebrate on the fourth Sunday of Advent. We celebrate God’s light and love, soft and persistent, “radiating love to all the earth.” We celebrate God’s peace and we anticipate how it might be manifest in the world.

Our reading from Isaiah today tells of a pre-exilic encounter between the prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz of Judah.

Isaiah had warned Ahaz of the coming destruction of Judah by the armies of Assyria, that the people would be sent away but that eventually they would return.

The passage, which presents both Yahweh and the prophet in conversation with Ahaz, has Yahweh offering to Ahaz a sign, any sign of his choosing, to show that God will keep God’s promise. Ahaz, in a mark of false piety as one who actually worships other Gods, quotes scripture saying that one is not to put the Lord our God to the test. This response prompts Isaiah to jump in saying,

*“Listen, house of David! Isn’t it enough for you to be tiresome for **people** that you are also tiresome before **my God**? **14** Therefore, the Lord **will** give you a sign. The young woman is pregnant and is about to give birth to a son, and she will name him Immanuel.*

Immanuel - God with us. This was not intended, in its time, to be any kind of prophecy of the birth of Jesus. This writing was not meant, as Barbara Lundblad puts it, “for people on this side of the New Testament.”

No, this sign was for Ahaz and Ahaz alone, a sign that God would keep God's word. The young woman Isaiah spoke of was a woman from their time - perhaps even a relative of the King himself. The child, and the name to be given to it, was a sign for the besieged people of Judah that God was with them, even in this most difficult of times. It was a sign that God's peace would be with them, even as they went through many challenges and ordeals, that God's peace went with them and awaited them on the other side.

Matthew, a Jewish writer writing centuries later to a Jewish audience, seeking to help them understand who this Jesus, who been born, died, and resurrected, was in relation to the history of the Jewish people and their long-expected Messiah. In several places in his Gospel Matthew paints Jesus as the new Moses, who, like his predecessor, would save his people.

Leaning on Isaiah's message of God's faithfulness in saving the people centuries earlier, Matthew adopts Isaiah's image of the young woman giving birth to a child, seeing Jesus' conception and birth in those earlier scriptures. And through that understanding then, we have Matthew's story of how God's angel came to Joseph in a dream and assured him that Mary had not been unfaithful to him as he assumed, but that the child she carried was from God, a sign from God that God would, again, save God's people.

The name Jesus literally means "God saves."

And Matthew tells us how Joseph, believing the vision that he had received in the dream, did not separate from Mary, but instead married her, and when the child was born, named him Jesus. The

dream, the message from the angel, was that in the midst of all that Joseph imagined was going on, in the midst of all that was happening in the kingdom and the world as they knew it, God's peace was with them - God's peace accompanied them and would be with them on the other side.

Today, I want to share with you excerpts from a writing by Barbara Brown Taylor. I don't, as a rule, borrow this heavily from another person's work, but when I encountered this message in my reading earlier this week, I knew I had to share it with you as part of our message today on Peaceful Joy.

If you don't know of her, Barbara Brown Taylor is a now retired Episcopal Priest and professor of religion at Columbia School of Theology in Georgia.

The author of many, many books, her down home style of preaching and teaching has made her a highly sought after speaker as well. The writing I want to share with you today is from a 1997 book titled *Bread of Angels*, and comes from the chapter titled "God's Daring Plan."

Isn't that a marvelous story. I love how she paints such wonderful images for us of creation and of God's story throughout the Hebrew Bible, all the way to the nativity. It's hard for some to believe that God would come into this world, to be with us, especially as a baby.

No wonder then, that an angel visits Joseph in his dreams to show Joseph how the Messiah would be born into the world. "Do not be afraid," says the angel.

But there is much to be afraid of!

The 9 months of pregnancy allows plenty of opportunity for feelings of fear and anxiety to take residence in hopeful parents. In this time of transition, this time of gestation, God sends a messenger of peace.

The peace God offers, peaceful joy, is deep and wide, nudging its way through our lives, not unlike a newborn firefly, eventually bursting forth in radiant light.

Peaceful joy brings balance to what feels out-of-sorts in the world. In a world that so often feels scary, peaceful joy speaks words of comfort.

In a world that values strength and fortitude, peaceful joy portrays vulnerability.

In a world full of kings and rulers fighting for power, peaceful joy is born in the form of a warm, flesh and blood baby.

So, in this Advent and Christmas season, may you know, in the birth of this child, the gift of a warm and radiant Peaceful Joy that God offers to us all. Amen.