

Safe Keeping

a sermon

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Isaiah 11:1-10

In a few weeks, we likely will all be exchanging presents with loved ones. It is a nice Christmastime ritual, provided we don't go too crazy with it.

Some of us will get these presents in boxes that include helpful little messages — you've seen them, right? — with words like “Warning,” “Caution,” “Danger,” “Cuidado.” These warn us about all sorts of bad things that can happen if you use what's in the box in the wrong way.

Sure, it's probably a good thing that we're given these warnings. Better safe than sorry.

But I often wonder who they're for. I mean, really, who needs to be told that placing that cool plastic bag over one's head would be a bad idea? Are there really people so, let's see, *uninformed* that they have to be told not to drop plugged-in toasters into full bathtubs, or use desk chairs as go-carts, or stick their fingers into spinning blenders?

I guess there are. So thank you, Mr. Packing Person, for your helpful note.

Some of this, of course, is the result of a culture of lawsuits. Some of it comes from a culture of risk taking, ignorance, or just plain stupidity. Companies include obvious warnings in packages because people can be litigious and people can be dense. So companies insert these helpful notes as much to protect themselves as to protect others.

I believe that such warnings point to a fundamental human need: to be safe. We all want safety, for ourselves and for our loved ones. Even those honorable women and men who nobly engage in dangerous work every day — military personnel and police officers and firefighters and powerline technicians — do so to keep the rest of us safe.

Because it's a dangerous world out there, full of risk and peril.

Some of those dangers come from nature:

diseases or contagions,
pests or predators,
wind or water or shaking earth.

And some of the dangers, a great many of them actually, come from other people. Humans are a danger to each other.

The sad reality is that some people don't want safety.

They want danger.
They crave disruption.
They yearn to inflict their unhappiness on others.

So they seek out the dangerous for themselves, and look to expose others to their danger.

Yet this willful and wicked disregard for the well-being of others isn't the only reason why humans are a danger to each other. The other reason, perhaps the more common reason, has to do with *fear*. Some people are so fearful about the dangers to them and their loved ones —

a fear often made even greater in their minds by ignorance — that they lash out against those not related to them, those from other families or tribes or lands. Many, many wars have started from the belief that *your* safety means *my* danger.

We yearn for safety, and we wish for safekeeping.



The passage I just read from the book of Isaiah speaks of a time of ultimate safety, led by a promised king to come who will be the center and the cause of that safety.

To those who first heard this promise, Isaiah's people in the land of Judah, it was a big deal. Because they had really big concerns about safety, for themselves and for their families and for their nation. They lived in dangerous times, and the dangers seemed to multiply day by day, month by month, year by year.

Isaiah's message to them in these early chapters was about the certain outcome of those dangers. These would not disappear, but instead would together come crashing down upon Isaiah's people.

Jerusalem would fall; Judah would be crushed.

This would happen, Isaiah told them, because they had turned their backs on God. For they were no longer truly the nation that God had called them to be, but instead were a commonwealth of injustice, a society of faithlessness.

Their politics were corrupt.

Their economies were abusive.

And their religious practices, well, they were a sham, all meant to make themselves feel good about themselves, even as the strong bullied the weak and the powerful threatened the safety of the powerless, while king and priests alike looked the other way, and even encouraged it all.

A reckoning was coming, Isaiah told them, God's judgment on them for too many years of infidelity. The nation, like a great tree once both proud and tall, would be chopped down and laid low, leaving in its place only a stump.

But then, the prophecy looks beyond the disaster to come. From that stump a shoot will grow, a branch from the roots of the once great tree. Isaiah calls this the "stump of Jesse" and the "root of Jesse."

Who was Jesse? Why, Jesse was the father of David, who of course was the beloved king of Israel from of old. So God, through Isaiah, is telling the people that after the disaster to come and from the remnant that would remain a new David will come on the scene: an ideal king, a godly king, a king of promise and peace.

He will be filled with God's Spirit, given wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge of and reverence for God. His reign will be one of righteousness and justice. Unlike many rulers,

who are swayed by appearances

and snookered by corrupt advisers,

who always side with the rich at the expense of the poor,

who put their thumbs on the scales of justice when it benefits them,

the new David will be just and fair, setting things right and making things equitable.

His reign will be marked by justice and safety. He will put an end to the predatory behavior of the powerful, those wolves of finance and lions of politics and tigers of military might against whom the lambs and calves and other weak beasts usually, repeatedly, have no chance. In the age to come, in the age of the new David, they *will* have a chance, more than a chance, a certainty.

They will have justice and safety.
They will have peace and security.

Because the new David will not be bound by the usual or the repeated, the so-called normal way of things.

Those who used to be to each other as predator and prey will live alongside each other

in comfort,
in peace,
in safety,

all because of the justice brought by the new David, all because of his peace and the safety that is both his gift and his command.

That is God's promise to Isaiah's people,

a promise of peace following the destruction,
of safety following the danger,

a promise to be centered on and fulfilled in the Messiah King, the new David.



In three weeks, we will celebrate the birth of Jesus. Although not all accept it or believe it, he is the promised Messiah King; he is the new David promised by God. His good news is news of peace and safety both given and commanded. And he is able to give it. He does give it. He will give it.

But even as we will soon celebrate Christmas, celebrate that Christ has come, and perhaps have even started celebrating, shouldn't we be truthful? Shouldn't we be honest? Because if we are honest and truthful, we'll admit that Christ's peace and safety are not fully, clearly here.

Suffering persists. Wars endure. Injustice continues to grind down on the innocent and powerless.

Christ has come. But his coming does not yet seem to be complete.

That is, actually, part of what is so important about Advent: taking the time to acknowledge that even though Jesus has come, he has not come fully, his day is ahead of us, a promise delivered in part but for which we yearn and pray that it will soon be delivered completely. There is longing in Advent, not merely a longing for presents and parties, but an honest longing for Christ's complete reign as the center of a new age of peace in which all will be kept safe.

Yet the honesty should go even further, and deeper within. Because we would do well to admit that we bear some blame for the incomplete state of peace around us. We ourselves

have not fully accepted Christ's gifts of peace and safety, nor have we completely accepted his command to be a people of peace and a community of safety to those who are in danger.

Oh, sure. We aren't all that bad. Quite likely, we haven't abused others. Perhaps we have not turned away those who have come among us seeking a safe place, a refuge from dangers to body or mind or spirit.

But whenever we treat the peace of Christ as a gift to be enjoyed only in the soul or to be realized only in heaven and not also as a command to be obeyed here in today's world, then we have been complicit in the works of predators and tyrants. We've made it easier for them. We've given them religious cover.

Really, we cannot honestly claim the salvation and peace that Jesus will give if we don't participate in the safety and justice Jesus now commands.

If instead

we scoff at those who yearn for safety and have found little,
or dismiss the concerns of those who cry for justice and peace yet have been
denied both,

then we show that our hearts are hard and our faith is cold, and that we have not fully, truly, welcomed Jesus as the Messiah King.

There are Christians — we know the stories — who have been a danger to others, who have caused grievous harm to the vulnerable.

There are churches — we know the stories — that have not at all been safe places, for children or immigrants or marriages or the poor or the handicapped or the lonely or the questioning.

And even if we know these stories only on the outside, even if we have not committed such misdeeds ourselves or been actively responsible for them, we do well to acknowledge the role we have played in normalizing them, excusing them, ignoring them.

And we do well to accept our common responsibility to work against the terribly destructive message they communicate to the weak and vulnerable: that, contrary to the gift and command of Jesus, maybe Christians and the churches they inhabit just might not be so safe after all.

Jesus gives us peace. It is a peace that touches your heart. It is a holy peace that heals your soul and mends your relationship with God.

This peace is not merely spiritual, if by "spiritual" you think of something only internal and never having any outward effect, something completely separate from your culture and your politics and your economics.

This peace is both the gift of Jesus and the command of Jesus. He wants us to *have* his peace, but he also wants us to *keep* his peace: showing it to others, providing to them the safety that we have learned from and enjoyed in him.

For we have been touched and taught by his peace. How can we not show it to others?

We have been welcomed into his safe embrace. How can we not welcome others with it?

We have been redeemed by him who walked into dangers terrible and great for us and for our salvation. How can we not with others yearn for their safety and weep for their suffering, and with them work and pray for the safekeeping they need?



My friends, as we make our way through December to the celebration of Christ's birth, let us seek the peace of Jesus,

both his gift and his command,

so we may have his peace and keep his peace,

being for others representatives of the safety of our Lord,
and helping them arrive at the safekeeping he gives.

And now to Jesus Christ, who loves us
and freed us from our sins by his blood
and made us to be a kingdom,
priests of his God and Father,
to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

(from Revelation 1:5-6, NRSV)