

“What Can Be More Ridiculous than Living in Peace?”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church
for Sunday, December 4, 2016

Advent 2 – St. Andrew’s Day

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10

Matthew 3:1-12

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

Fred Craddock, long time professor of New Testament and Preaching at various universities and divinity colleges throughout the United States, has written many books on the biblical story and how to share it to a modern audience. For me his most helpful book is entitled *Overhearing the Gospel*. In it, Craddock suggests that those of us who attend church on a regular basis, or have a history of exposure to the stories of the Bible and the traditions of the faith, especially at high holy seasons such as Advent-Christmas, and Lent-Easter, have heard the same stories over and over again – we have “overheard them” in Craddock’s language.

But there is another way in which that phrase is used, and it is that we should see the gospel as interesting as when we are sitting in a restaurant and we “overhear” the conversation next to us. It has a new interest.

I am reminded of that as some years ago I spoke at Levack in St. John’s United Church. Coming from out of town, I stayed at the motel just north of the town on Highway 144, and had breakfast in the restaurant there. I could not help but overhear the conversation of the couple next to me. I did not need to be particularly nosy, since we were the only two tables with guests seated in the whole restaurant.

This couple was determining how they would return to their home in Orillia that day. One partner (who appeared to be the driver by the way he spoke) was planning to go south through Parry Sound, and take highway 12 over to Orillia off the 400. The other partner thought it would be far more interesting to go through North Bay, and maybe stop at some markets and stores on Highway 11 on the way through towns like Bracebridge, Huntsville, and Gravenhurst – after all, a leisurely drive on a Sunday would be enjoyable. But highway 11 is busy on a summer Sunday, was the retort, and the conversation went on from there.

You can probably fill in the rest, especially if you are married and have lived those discussions in determining a holiday route.

Overhearing a conversation of people we do not know and of issues that surprise us is far more interesting than a story we have heard dozens of times, and so the gospel, argues Craddock, has a new life when we “overhear” it in that way.

The stories for today are much like that. To even think of the lion eating straw, or cows and bears eating together, or wolves and sheep being together in the same field seems so ridiculous, yet we have heard them so often if we show up in church during Advent that we have turned such far-fetched notions into church normalcy. But they are not. They are shocking and amazing – maybe even ridiculous.

Today is Peace Sunday in the Advent chorus of weeks. We might be better off if we saw living peace as ridiculous – at least we would know it is not a simple activity, and demands something from us that is not normally there.

Peter Steinke has done a lot of work around how our family systems reflect our natural approach to life. Family dynamics often influence how we view and live in the world.

The product of a family where he was a middle child, Steinke himself says his default position in any group or organization is to find the common ground, and see ways to get people to work together.

Middle children are often the peace makers of the family. That is not to suggest that first born or last born cannot be peaceful, cooperative people, but they may need to be more aware of their reality and biases to overcome natural tendencies.

There is a biblical quote that speaks to that from Isaiah. Isaiah says that we must have a new attitude:

“He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear.”

If we simply determine what our eyes tells us, or what we hear with our ears, as normative, we will never be able to be open to the ridiculous opportunities that can lead to peace and hope and vitality.

Dreams of Peace is a program developed by Dr. Barry Mann to teach Arabic and Hebrew to English speaking people, one line at a time. Dr. Mann feels that

if people are willing to spend the time to learn the alphabet, vocabulary, and grammar of these two challenging languages, then maybe they will have the energy and desire to seek peace between two long-standing cultures. At least they will understand how difficult peace can be.

Last week, Catherine shared with you a stone with the word “Hope” on it for Advent 1. Today I circulated a stone with the word “Peace” on it. When the stone was shared with the congregation last week, it began as a stone with a soft, blue-grey tone.

But look at it now – the “hope” stone is dark, cobalt-black, almost like a piece of coal. Catherine told me that when she received it at the door, it was almost too hot to handle. The energy stored in this small stone was incredible – energy from all of you.

Where is the “peace” stone that is being circulated today? (Ralph lifted it up). Again, the stone has been transformed – much darker because you have held it, reflected about peace holding it, prayed for peace while it rested in your hands, put yourself into the hope and desire for peace. The stone has changed.

What a message for us who seek the ridiculous notion of peace. If we put our hearts and minds and hands into the task, the very beings that can turn a blue-grey stone into a hot stone of transformed colour can be the hands that help to create peace in the world.

We have such power if we can harness the divine energy within to make a difference. It is up to us to do that in our advent journey.

If we, collectively, have the power to change a stone’s colour and temperature, we have the power to make peace in the world. It is up to us in our Advent journey to be open to doing just that.

It may be ridiculous, but it is also possible, with God’s help.