

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.” Isaiah 9:6

There has been a lot of hope put on the coming of the Messiah.

We want so much from the Messiah of God whom we call Jesus. We look for God to send someone to set us free. Someone who will stop the wars we wage. Someone who will bring justice for all people, eliminate hunger, heal all the sick. Christians believe that this Savior, our Christ by his birth, has ushered in God’s Kingdom of Heaven. In that Kingdom, the Earth will be a place of beauty, food enough for all...and peace. Isaiah foretold this.

The angel told the shepherds at the birth of Jesus that yes, this is the One. This is the Messiah you’ve all hoped for. *“Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Luke 2:10*

But when Jesus the Christ walked among us did this prophecy by Isaiah and the announcement of the angel come to pass? Jesus preached peace. Jesus healed the sick. Jesus fed the hungry; 5000 on a hillside above the Sea of Galilee. But wars didn’t cease. People still fell ill and died. Jesus himself was killed because of anger, fear and jealousy. All the while Jesus told his disciples, “The kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”

Did this baby born to Mary really give us the Kingdom of Heaven? A place of peace, love and joy? It’s easy to fall into despair when so much is going wrong for so many people. We’ve seen a great deal of injustice and strife this year leading to protests and even in some cases riots. We have experienced a great deal of death from the global pandemic. Over 300,000 now have died in our country and the numbers of people falling ill and dying is still on the rise.

Although life was very hard in Biblical days too, those who followed Jesus, listened and learned from him and were radically changed by the experience. They were sent out by the Lord and given power themselves to heal and to forgive. They did see the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven. And it has been that way for Christians ever since. Christianity has spread throughout the world because of Jesus and because of those who have told the story of Jesus to us. Millions and millions of people have come, through faith, to understand that we can live in peace, that we are forgiven, and we are beloved of God forever.

The Kingdom of Heaven is here. And it certainly is not yet fully here.

I received a Christmas Letter from The Rev. Christopher Webber. He retired from Christ Church Canaan and All Saints Cornwall. He now lives in San Francisco with one of his children, and he gave me permission to quote a bit of his letter. He says:

“I grew up in stressful times. I was [a child] at a children’s choir event on a Sunday evening in 1941 when a man came in holding up a newspaper with a banner headline about Pearl Harbor. I was in Junior High School when the atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. I was in college when the Korean War broke out, and in New Zealand on 9/11. So why should I be surprised when a pandemic takes control of life on the planet.”

We reflect on the reality of the world. When will the Kingdom finally fully arrive for us? Will the message of Jesus finally begin to catch hold...like a sort of herd immunity that we’ve heard so much about recently? Experts posit that seventy to ninety percent of our population will have to have individual immunity to achieve that herd immunity which will finally slow the Covid-19 virus. Will the Spirit of God eventually give us **herd faith** that will save us from ourselves, from war and the violence of people against people? It will depend on individual faith. That much seems clear.

We long for the peaceable Kingdom, sometimes displayed on Christmas cards:

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” Isaiah 11:6

Watching the birds squabble at the feeder outside my window is an endless source of amusement. It’s definitely not peaceable! The chickadees fight off the goldfinches, the woodpeckers ignore the lot of them and just swoop in and carefully choose a peanut. And a little pine siskin just calmly perches at the edge of the feeder and eats seemingly unperturbed by the hubbub around him or her.

The other day I opened the window and leaned out to fill the feeder as usual and most of the chickadees scattered to nearby perches to wait until I got out of the way. But on this morning, one chickadee was incensed that I was filling the feeder. It was so funny to hear her/him squawking at me as if I were an intruder who was going to take the seed out of his mouth. This one had a lot ofchutzpah. But not enough brain power to be able to connect my actions with the source of the food that he needs.

The idea of the peaceable kingdom as an embodiment of the Kingdom of Heaven is sadly not a reality. Lions are never going to eat straw instead of lambs. And chickadees will never stop their inter-species squabbling. As for humans...are we hopeless too?

Here is my main point today: It’s much easier to dream about Jesus our Christ doing what we want him to do for us (making everybody get along) than it is to conform to what God has asked of us. God has given us the gift of love, and then what we must do is love one another. God has given us the gifts of joy, peace, hope and we are tasked with making those a reality within ourselves and in the world around us. That’s the hard part.

If we know that the Messiah has come to us through our experiences and our faith, then we must live into that to the best of our abilities.

The miracle of a new vaccine is here and beginning to be given to those on the front lines of health care. We give thanks to God for the diligence and intelligence of scientists who have

worked tirelessly to bring us a potential cure which may finally allow us to achieve enough immunity to stop the spread of Covid-19.

And now, I read in the papers that there is intense lobbying and jockeying for position to see who gets vaccinated first. It should be the elderly, no, it should be the medical community, no, it should be essential workers. Sigh. I even heard one woman last week tell our Bishops that they should lobby the governor so that Episcopal priests could be at the front of the line to receive vaccines. Everyone seems to be certain that they should be allowed to jump ahead of someone else. It's like the birds squabbling at the bird feeder for a limited source of food.

And government is put in the position of God, deciding who will get the vaccine and when that will occur. What would Jesus ask us to do? The Kingdom of Heaven is both already here because of the Incarnation of God in Christ, and it is not yet here because we are very imperfect at following Christ.

I ask us all to imagine that line of people who need and will receive the Covid-19 vaccine, (with ourselves include in the line) and ask us to actually see the people. We must look at each other and care about what happens to each other. Jesus, the Incarnate God, asks us to do this for and with each other on Christmas Eve and every day.