

“A Path of Righteousness and Peace”
Rev. Debra Given, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia
December 7, 2014 Advent 2B

Isaiah 40:1-11 2 Peter 3:8-15a

DA read from 2 Peter this morning: “We wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home.” Judging by recent events it seems we haven’t arrived yet. Last week has been dominated by more news of demonstrations, grief and anger at the treatment of people of color by police in this country. This time it was a New York grand jury’s failure to bring charges against the officer who took down Eric Garner in a choke hold that resulted in his death. And now another grand jury has been impaneled to decide whether to indict a Brooklyn officer who shot and killed a young black man, Akai Gurley, while he was walking with his girlfriend in the stairwell of his building. The officer says it was an accident. Still, he did not report to headquarters or call 911 immediately afterwards. I read that instead he texted a union representative while the young man lay dying.*

But this is nothing new. One black person is killed by police, security guards or vigilantes nearly every day in this country, and rarely is anyone held accountable for these deaths. It’s hard to judge individual cases because there’s always some understandable reason why things didn’t turn out the way they should have. But when you put it all together, the big picture tells a story that people of color are not being treated with the same care as white people.

A retired New York Police Captain, Eric Adams, wrote that when he was first working as a cop, a veteran cop who was white told Adams that when he saw a white person with a gun, he took extra care for himself and that person. But when he saw a black person with a gun, he took care only for himself.** This kind of attitude certainly doesn’t represent all police officers. The police officers we know in Leonia are thoughtful and responsible. But the fact is, some people are racist. And *all of us* harbor some amount of prejudice, even those of us who try our best not to be that way. Black men face extra danger just for being who they are. And so “we wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home.”

Ever since Jesus left this earth, Christians have been looking forward to his return in glory to usher in the reign of God on earth. The early church was convinced that it was going to happen soon, within their lifetimes. Many of them sold their belongings to have all things in common, because they believed that it would only be a short while until the end of the world when they wouldn’t need any belongings.

Then a generation went by and Jesus still hadn’t come. So people began to wonder whether it would happen at all. The writer of 2 Peter was disturbed by this shift in belief. So he warned against scoffers who “indulge their own lusts and say, ‘Where is the promise of his coming?’” (vs. 3-4) He argued that you can’t say Jesus isn’t coming, just because it hasn’t happened yet.

Any why not keep hoping? Prejudice, greed, injustice and violence are still at home on this earth. To hope for Jesus is to believe that another way is possible. And we can start living according to that way now, no matter how long it takes for Jesus to return. We don't have to accept things as they are. We can lift our voices in protest. We can work for justice. And we can hold onto hope in the midst of corruption and evil. And "we wait for new heavens and a new earth where righteousness is at home."

Now some people don't like the word "righteous," because they get it mixed up with *self*-righteous. When someone is self-righteous, it means they are sure they are right, and they lack compassion for others. But people who are truly righteous are not *self*-righteous at all. It just means that they fulfill their responsibility to other people and to God. In the Bible, a righteous person is someone who obeys God and preserves the peace and wholeness of the community, caring for those in need and acting with integrity and respect. And to say that righteousness is at home on the earth means that you can find people here who are righteous, that they are welcome here and feel they belong. When righteousness is at home on this earth justice and peace are expected and normal. There is no need to demonstrate or fight because people are already looking out for each other.

We're not there yet. Last week the NAACP led a 130 mile march from Michael Brown's apartment complex in Ferguson to the home of the Governor of Missouri in St. Louis. Many people supported them along the way, offering food, water and encouragement. But they also faced some angry opposition. One man waved a Confederate flag at them and shouted racial insults as the group marched past. Someone else yelled, "No peace, no welfare!"***

What is that supposed to mean? Keep quiet, or you don't get any money from the government? ... assuming, of course, that those who march are on welfare. Peace that ignores injustice and finds unrighteousness acceptable is no kind of peace. True peace comes when people live according to God's will, and work for understanding and justice.

Would you like to see what a righteous person looks like? We have righteous people right here in this church. One of them is DA Droser who has been a member of this congregation for 46 years. When DA says she will do something, she does it. She works quietly for the good of others and doesn't call attention to herself. Many years ago she helped organize the ecumenical Sunday School with other churches in town, as well as the youth group. She helped form the Asian Ministry Task Force and then served faithfully to ease tension and promote communication and understanding between Asian immigrants and other ethnic groups. And she has been an energizer behind our part of the Loaves and Fishes Soup Kitchen, organizing and serving meals for people in need. I hope you will join us after worship today to say goodbye to DA as she moves to Massachusetts this week to live closer to her children and grandchildren.

As we say goodbye to DA, we also welcome some new members to our congregation today. We hope they will feel at home among us, as they take their place in

this church, waiting for the time when righteousness is at home, and together with us, living according to that way as best they can.

Jonathan read a message of comfort and liberation from the prophet Isaiah this morning. This part of Isaiah was written when the Jewish people were living in exile in Babylon, and right before the fall of Babylon in 539 BC to Cyrus, King of Persia. Cyrus eventually allowed the Jewish people to return to Palestine. Isaiah was trying to persuade those in despair to believe, that after generations of being forced to live in a foreign land, away from their homes, God was about to liberate them and return them to their homeland. It's a message of comfort and hope. The exile is almost over. Lift up your voices, don't be afraid.

There are many people in this world today who live as exiles – millions of refugees fleeing unrest and war, millions of people locked up in prisons, or condemned to ghettos, or marginalized by their race. But there is another way, and we can prepare for it. It is the way of the Lord Jesus Christ, the path of righteousness and peace. This Advent, may we come closer to what God wants for us, in our own lives and in the world.

* Meghan Keneally and James Hill, “EXCLUSIVE: Rookie NYPD Officer who shot Akai Gurley in Brooklyn stairwell was texting union rep as victim lay dying.” *The New York Daily News*, Friday, December 5, 2014.

** Eric L. Adams, “We Must Stop Police Abuse of Black Men,” *The New York Times*, Friday, December 5, 2014, Op-Ed page.

*** Eli Yokley, “Ferguson Protesters Reach the Missouri Capital with Their Message,” *The New York Times*, Saturday, December 6, 2014, page A15.