What are your images of peace? (Pause and reflect for a moment.) The people in Jesus’ day had an idea of what the coming Kingdom would be like when the Messiah arrived. They had formed it from the images of the prophets. It would be a Kingdom like _______. I am sure there were about as many different ideas then as there are now.

John the Baptist came proclaiming the coming of the new Kingdom of God. He was a new voice crying in the wilderness. If you read John’s message it does not seem like one of reconciliation, quietness or peace. He called the Pharisees and Sadducees who came out to see him a brood of vipers. He spoke out about the religious establishment of his day saying that the axe was at their roots. These do not really seem like words that were meant to bring peace, reconciliation and hope.

I was watching a cooking show the other evening. It is one of those shows where every week one of the contestants is eliminated. There was one chef who did not handle criticism very well. Even the other contestants got a look of apprehension on their faces when his food was about to be critiqued. I imagine this is how the religious leaders of John’s day saw John. They were not pleased with the images he was presenting of their rule. We know that Herod and his wife were not happy with John about the way he spoke about their relationship. Herod had John imprisoned. Herodias had him beheaded!

They were expecting an earthly Kingdom. They would again rule the land with a King of their own. They may even have thought of ruling some of the surrounding nations. They would make and live by their own laws. Peace for them would mean the absence of war in their land. The kingdom would be for them and for them alone. It would not really be welcoming to outsiders. Peace would be on their terms. They would rule again.

This was not the peace that came at Bethlehem. Now new words were introduced into the vocabulary about God: forgiveness, love, reconciliation to name a few. Now there are images like: turning the other cheek, going the extra mile. And, there are demands that the hungry be fed, the naked clothed, the widows cared for with justice prevailing in the land. They were not the images of peace they expected. This was not in the terms of their surrender. The babe born in Bethlehem was turning upside-down their expectations of the coming Kingdom.

Peace is never an easy task at best. The world is honoring Nelson Mandela over these past few days. We discover that he found peace through forgiveness. So many interviewed in the past few days spoke of his willingness to forgive and move a nation forward. Corrie ten Boom talks about having to forgive the most notorious guard in the prison camp — the one who caused the death of her sister. Is forgiveness the first step to peace?

We want peace but we want it on our terms. After all we won the war, didn’t we? We demand religious freedoms for us but not for those who are not like us. We want our moral compass to be the one that rules the world. We can have peace — if you do things my way. However, it is the “my way” mentality that usually leads to conflict. Someone wants to do it differently. They have a different idea of peace and the conflict begins.

I thought about our visits to the city-state of Singapore. It is a diverse city with many cultures and religions existing together. They are living in peace (or so it seems). It has been deemed as one of the safest cities in the world. People move freely among the various ethnic neighborhoods. They eat and shop in culturally diverse communities. Each is respected, tolerated — no, things are not perfect, but they are peaceful. Peace is often accepting the
difference in others and learning to live with them - we sometimes call it marriage! And, it is never easy.

Look again at Isaiah’s vision. The more one examines it the more interesting it becomes. The coming Kingdom of the Messiah will be one where justice and righteousness are the daily norms. The King will go by what is right rather than by what he sees or hears. There will be justice for all. He will rule with righteousness and he will be faithful in his decisions.

I thought about North Korea as I was working on this sermon. I have stood in the demilitarized zone on the South Korean side looking over into North Korea. As we looked we saw what appeared to be a modern city. It had tall buildings, well groomed streets, nice green spaces. Our guide asked us to look closer and as we did he pointed out that there were no people. The city is only a shell to give the impression of wealth and prosperity. One of the guards said that he had never seen anyone there - there are only minimal lights at night — not the way a city should be. The Messiah will come and judge rightly not only by what he sees.

Then look at the relationships Isaiah uses — truly unnatural relationships. The wolf and lamb are together in peace. The lion and goat are dwelling in unity. The calf, lion and yearling are playing together. And the lion has become vegetarian like the ox! There is no sense of danger. Each is living in harmony with the other. Now, think about it. What is the cause of this type of relationship? As I thought I realized that each is satisfied and cared for—it has what it needs. There is no hunger or thirst. Each is comfortable with the other because its basic needs are met. They live in peace because they have what they need to live in peace.

If you have ever observed the African plain or watering holes - you may have noticed lions resting in the grass near the watering hole. The other animals are there, drinking - watching. However, there is a peace at the moment because the lions are not hungry — they are fed. As long as they are satisfied the place is a place of safety.

One is coming, says John, one that the world is not prepared for. One the world has never seen before. He is bringing the Kingdom of God. Another John says of him, “He was in the world, and though the world was made by him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him” (John 1:10-11). He came in peace…

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