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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus, the Christ. Amen.

Our oldest son, Eric played varsity baseball in High School starting his sophomore year. Eric had a gift for hitting the baseball. He was among the metro leaders in batting average his senior year and won all-conference honors. He had a sweet swing. His teammates called him their "hitting machine".

Eric played second base on what was an all-sophomore infield his sophomore year. The group stayed together and great things were expected of them their senior year. While Eric was gifted with the baseball bat, he was not gifted with the baseball glove. He never seemed to learn the skill of fielding a hard ground ball cleanly and with confidence. But it is why he played second base. Eric learned early on that if you played second base you could easily knock a ground ball down, pick it up, and still have plenty of time to throw a runner out at first. So it was that, while he wasn't very pretty at second base, he hardly ever had an error.

His senior year Eric was captain of the baseball team. His baseball coach decided to put a junior, who was a very capable fielder, in at second base and have Eric hit as designated hitter. As a result, when his team was out in the field, Eric spent time behind the dugout playing catch with another team mate and trying to stay loose and warmed up. And without him at second base, the infield made error after error, physically and mentally as well.

One afternoon I was in the dugout keeping the scorebook as the game was in progress. After yet another error by the infield, coach looked at me and said, "Reverend, I have no idea what has happened to our infield." "I wouldn't normally say anything, coach," I replied, "but if you are asking, I think the leader of your infield is playing catch behind the dugout." The next game Eric was back at second base. And as he took charge of his infield, the infield transformed itself back to its old, comfortable, competent self.

Leadership. Something that is sometimes most noticeable when it isn't there. You perhaps have experienced it in your life as well. In many different areas of life it is the lack of leadership that can easily cause any organization or effort to stumble and fall.

Lack of Leadership. It was the issue in the time of Isaiah in the Bible at the time of our First Reading from the book of Isaiah, the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter. These words from the prophet Isaiah come from the time in the history of the Old Testament people of God after the United Kingdom of Israel had fallen into civil strife, and divided itself into the Kingdom of Israel to the North and the Kingdom of Judah to the South.

At this particular time in its history Judah was ruled by a king by the name of Ahaz. King Ahaz and Judah were living in danger and fear of military powers to their north and east. Israel and the Kingdom of Aram had joined forces and allied themselves against Judah. In the midst of these circumstances, Isaiah was sent by God to King Ahaz to reassure King Ahaz that the Lord would protect Jerusalem and Judah if only Ahaz would place his faith in the Lord.

This is where King Ahaz failed in his leadership. For Ahaz was not a man of faith. Any faith Ahaz did have was placed in idols. King Ahaz, in fact, rejected the God of the Hebrews and trust in that God. Ahaz, on his own, sought to solve his military problem to his own liking. Ahaz worked to build a military alliance with another kingdom, Assyria, further to the north and east. And because of this disobedience, Isaiah warned King Ahaz that God was going to judge the people of Judah for their lack of trust in him. Isaiah saw disaster ahead for the people of God because of their leadership that led them away from trust in God. Leadership, and the people who were following that leadership, had truly lost their way.

At the same time, Isaiah spoke a word of hope during those difficult days. Even though Isaiah saw disaster ahead for Judah because of lack of leadership and lack of faith, Isaiah saw that there was hope for Judah beyond King Ahaz. Isaiah declared that God's people were going to survive the time of lack of faithful leadership and that in a future time they would be blessed with leadership that was all that God could want it to be. Isaiah looked into the future and saw the arrival of a future king who would lead the people in faithfulness. Together, this king and the people of God would walk with confidence in the way of the Lord.

Isaiah indicates that this ideal king will be a descendent from the family of Jesse – Jesse being the father of King David, who was remembered as the best king that the United Kingdom of Israel had ever had prior to its demise. Isaiah thinks of the dynasty of David as a tree that has been cut down to its stump, but that the promise of this future king is like a branch growing out of the roots of that stump. "A shoot shall come out,"

declares Isaiah, "from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

In addition, says Isaiah, this ideal king will be filled with the spirit of God. He will be characterized as wise, understanding, powerful, knowledgeable, and strongly in relationship with God. He will have a concern in society for the poor and the meek and will lead strongly against the wicked. The peaceful leadership of this ideal king will produce a peaceful kingdom. "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him," declares Isaiah, "the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord....with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth..."

The peaceful kingdom that the leadership of this ideal king will produce among the people of God is also described by Isaiah with hope and optimism. The relationships of that kingdom are described in terms of the original Garden of Eden, with all of creation living in harmony and peace, including even the animals. "The wolf shall live with the lamb," declares Isaiah, "the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. "...they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain..."

And, finally, the influence of this peaceful kingdom will be unique in that it will stretch even to all the nations of the world. And the king of whom Isaiah speaks will be looked to by all the nations for wisdom and guidance. "On that day," Isaiah concludes, "the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

This king of whom Isaiah speaks did not arrive in Isaiah's life-time. He did not arrive in the life-time of any of the people who heard Isaiah speak. But the promise was not forgotten. The promise was passed on, even through times of military defeat and oppression. And for century after century the people of God continued to look for the shoot of the stump of Jesse to arise among them and lead them to this peaceful kingdom.

It is easy to see, perhaps, why Jesus was understood by some to be this promised king. Although he was born of humble beginnings, in a stable in Bethlehem and laid in a manger, because there was no room for his family in an inn, yet he was a descendent of Jesse and David. Jesus had the right lineage to be the peaceful king of whom Isaiah had foretold.

And, again, at the time that Jesus was ready to enter into his public ministry, the events that transpired at his baptism brought to mind Isaiah's promise of a king upon whom would be the Spirit of God. For we are told in Holy Scripture that "when Jesus was baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him."

And once Jesus began his public ministry and teaching, much of what he did and said had to do with leading the people into a peaceful kingdom, a kingdom in which relationships resembled the peace and harmony of the Garden of Eden. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," taught Jesus, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."

And again, "You have heard that it was said," taught Jesus, "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I say to you, do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile."

Indeed, there was much about Jesus that commended him during his time on this earth as the fulfillment of Isaiah's words. And there were people who believed. But, on the other hand, there were also those who saw no kingship in Jesus. There were those who were very much aware of the ongoing rule of the Roman Empire over Jerusalem and Judah and saw no military or political leadership coming from this Jesus. And so there were those who continued to wait, and who even continue to wait today for the fulfillment of the words of Isaiah.

Dear friends in Christ, as we look forward to the celebration of Christmas, 2007 during these days of Advent, we do look forward to the celebration as the celebration of the birth of the king of whom Isaiah foretold. We are of the understanding that the peaceful kingdom which Isaiah envisioned was not a kingdom to be established by military might – indeed, it is not a political kingdom at all, but rather a spiritual kingdom.

It is a kingdom that has been established through the death and resurrection of Jesus. It is a peaceful kingdom under a king of peace of which we are citizens now but whose fullness we have not yet experienced. And yet, as people live in peace and harmony under the leadership of Christ, we have opportunity to know a foretaste of the peace of the heavenly kingdom that is yet to come.

So it is that we are called during the days that are now upon us, as people of faith, to live through what is often a very hectic time – the season that is Advent – in peace and tranquility. So it is that we are called to offer testimony to the peaceful kingdom which we believe has been established by living it to the best of our ability during these days.

Days of shopping are called among us to be days lived within the context of the breaking into our lives of the peaceful kingdom of Christ. Days of decorating and baking are called among us to be days lived within the context of the breaking into our lives of the peaceful kingdom of Christ. And time spent traveling and visiting with family and friends and attending a variety of programs and events are called among us to be days lived within the context of the breaking into our lives of the peaceful kingdom of Christ.