

The Peaceable Kingdom...As If!

Isaiah 11.1-9

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First Christian Church

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A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
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.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

We may like to think that it's the Christmas season, but it's not, at least not yet. We're in the season of Advent, which began last Sunday. Advent is the backstory to Christmas. Among other things, it's about

waiting, like the people of Israel who waited 700 years after the prophecy in today's scripture for God's Savior to arrive. It's also about we Christians who abide upon the earth at the present time, idly wondering when our risen Lord and Savior will return in glory. The followers of Jesus have been waiting nearly 2000 years for that, and I mention it because Advent is not only about Christ's first coming, but his second coming as well. One of the oldest Christian confessions of faith is, "Christ has come, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." Two-thirds of that confession has come to pass. We're waiting for the final part.

In his First Coming, Jesus Christ taught his disciples—us—how to live in ways that are pleasing to God. He also died to save us from our sins. In rising from the dead, he defeated death. In his ascension, he opened the gateway to heaven, so that where he is we may be also. In the Second Coming, Christ will come in glory to not only save individual souls, but to redeem all of God's fallen Creation.

But let's go back to when the coming of a Savior was first envisioned. It was during one of Israel's many epic tragedies, 700 years before Jesus was born. The Prophet Isaiah envisioned the arrival of a Messiah. "Messiah" means "the anointed one." In today's scripture, Isaiah talked about the green shoot that would grow from the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David, Israel's greatest king. But let's go back even before David.

When the Israelites reached the Promised Land after years of wandering in the wilderness of Sinai, they weren't a nation, much less a kingdom. They were a loose confederation of twelve tribes, or clans, that had been enslaved in Egypt. They had a common ancestor named Israel and a set of laws that Moses, the leader who led them out of slavery, had received from God. Israel's original name was Jacob. He was the son of Isaac and the grandson of Abraham. Jacob was renamed "Israel" when he wrestled with an angel of the Lord. Israel means "One who struggles with the Lord." It was evidently quite a struggle. There is only one circumstance in which two people are physically closer to each other than they are in a wrestling match, but a wrestling match is not a love fest, and does not consist of two persons hugging each other. That was the kind of encounter the original Israel had with the angel of the Lord, and the kind of relationship Israel's descendants continued to have with the Lord himself. No people was ever closer to the Lord than Israel's descendants, and no one ever struggled more in that relationship. I learned this morning that, in sign language, the sign for Israel is a little finger wiping away tears. The people of Israel wept often.

For a brief period of time—about 100 years—the twelve clans of Israel were a united kingdom. That united kingdom had three kings—Saul, David, and David's son, Solomon. After Solomon died, the twelve tribes split apart. The ten tribes to the north kept the title "Kingdom of Israel." Those ten tribes were richer, more populous and more powerful than the

two tribes to the south, Judah and Benjamin, who called themselves the “Kingdom of Judah,” after the bigger of the two tribes. Jerusalem and the Temple were in Judah, and the kings of Judah were all descendants of David. The kings of Israel were not.

The northern kingdom of Israel lasted about 200 years. During those years, its kings often turned away from the Lord, and did horrible things, despite the Lord continually sending prophets like Elijah and Elisha and Amos to bring them back. In 721 B.C., Israel was conquered by the powerful and vicious kingdom of Assyria, the ancient world’s version of the Nazis. As a kingdom, Israel was exterminated, its people either slaughtered, enslaved, absorbed or turned into refugees. Even now, you hear the term, the “ten lost tribes of Israel.”

As soon as Israel was conquered, Assyria turned its attention to Judah. Hezekiah, a good king who strived to do what the Lord wanted, tried to bribe the Assyrians into going away and leaving his kingdom alone. He took all the gold the kingdom possessed, including the gold and silver vessels and ornaments of the Temple, and offered them to the Assyrian king. It wasn’t enough. The mighty, always victorious Assyrian army surrounded and besieged Jerusalem. The prophet Isaiah, who counseled King Hezekiah, told the king to be brave and trust in the Lord. Hezekiah did. The Assyrian army began to die *en masse* before the gates of Jerusalem. The Bible says the “angel of death” came upon them.

Modern epidemiologists think the Assyrians may have been brought low by

a plague, possibly bubonic, which was carried by the fleas that infested the rats and mice that swarmed the Assyrian trenches. So the Assyrian army went away and Jerusalem remained intact [II Kings 18 & 19].

Despite the Assyrian army having been laid low in front of the gates of Jerusalem, Judah was in a perilous condition. Its sister kingdom, Israel, had been wiped from the map. Judah itself was broke. Before it reached Jerusalem, the Assyrian army had devastated the land and remained a terrible threat. Once upon a time, there had been a united Israel, a great and powerful kingdom under David and Solomon. Now, all that was left was a small, impoverished, devastated, perpetually threatened little country. The people desperately needed some good news. The Lord provided that good news through a vision that the Prophet Isaiah received. The first part of Isaiah's vision said that the Lord would raise up a descendant of David who would slay all of the kingdom's deadly enemies. It is fitting and appropriate that victims of cruelty and violence pray to the Lord that the hearts of their enemies be changed, or their hands be stopped. If the hearts of the wicked cannot be changed, or their hands stopped, it is perfectly normal to hope their hearts will be stopped. That part of Isaiah's vision seemed plausible. After all, had not the mighty army of Assyria been laid low by the Lord before the very gates of Jerusalem? But the rest of the vision beggared belief:

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.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

Who could believe that? It seems preposterous. The only world any of us have ever lived in is one in which nature is red in tooth and claw, a Darwinian jungle in which only the fittest survive, until they don't anymore. But in Biblical religion, the earth was good at Creation, and in its midst was Eden, where there was neither predator nor prey, and all living creatures dwelt in peace. To them all, God proclaimed, "...to everything that has the breath of life, I give every green plant for food" [Genesis 1.27-31]. Then the first two humans messed it up by disobeying God, and because the humans had been given dominion over Creation, life on earth failed to be what God intended.

In this fallen world, life is divided against life, not only humans against humans, but animals against animals. We kill to eat, we kill to live, and so do they. But what if it was different? What would it be like if the wolf could live with the lamb? In our fallen world, the wolf and the lamb

obviously have two very different understandings of what it means to live. For the wolf, life entails eating the lamb, or some other savory mammal. For the lamb, life entails not being eaten. Being a shepherd does not entail transforming the wolves; it means keeping the wolves away from the lambs. But today's scripture says that wolves and lambs shall someday dwell together in peace. This is not a mere figure of speech, but a divine prophecy from God. Obviously, for that to happen, things have to change in a large way. It will happen when, Isaiah says, the earth is "full of the knowledge of the Lord."

I sometimes think that the only thing that keeps me in ministry is my absolute belief that there is a heaven, a place of infinite love that endures forever, "where pain and sorrow are no more and the tear is wiped from every eye," where our Lord Jesus Christ reigns, and where so many whom we love dwell in peace forever. There are a lot of people—more every day—whom I'm looking forward to seeing again. But the purpose of our earthly life is not to hunker down until we die. This beautiful earth, for all of its sorrows, was made by God to be good. As long as we live upon this earth, this earth will be the only home we will have. And because human beings have dominion over the earth, every time we reconcile with members of our own species--every time we make peace, however imperfect or fragile--we are helping to fulfill the purposes of God, and making things better for all of Creation. If we love our neighbors as ourselves; if we forgive as we have been forgiven; if we pray for our

enemies; if we love one another as Jesus loved us; if we feed the hungry, clothe the naked, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, care for the sick and visit the imprisoned, we are only doing what Jesus commands his disciples to do. How can the world not help but be better if we remember Jesus' commandments and strive to do them? But first, we must *remember*:

The tumult and the shouting dies;
The Captains and the Kings depart:
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice,
An humble and a contrite heart.
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget!

(Rudyard Kipling, *Recessional*)

Be with us yet, Lord, even if—*especially* if—we have already forgotten.

Amen.