



“The Lion and The Lamb”

a sermon by

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As we continue to take up the prophet's prophecies of Christ in the Advent season our scripture reading this second Wednesday in Advent comes from Isaiah 11:1-9. hear the Word of God: "A shoot shall come out from the stump 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 lions 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."

I know what you're thinking after hearing this vision of Isaiah for a greater peace. Probably the same thing I thought when I first heard this passage: Wow, what a nice idea. Possibly suitable material for a new ride at Disneyland, but not in a million years would this become a reality. It seems like a fairy tale construction that Isaiah serves up to us today. In our Bibles in front of you in the pews, the subject heading before this text is "The Peaceful Kingdom." And what a peaceful kingdom it is that he describes. The leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the child shall play over the hole of the serpent and they will not do violence. The most vulnerable being, a little child, roams freely among creation and is unharmed. This mood hearkens to another word from Isaiah, when nation shall be seated next to nation and they shall beat their swords into plowshares. They will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together, even diets that cause violence unto others will change- the lion shall eat straw like the ox. All existing in a perfect and unbelievable harmony. This is a peaceful kingdom indeed, one that seems so far from where we are today. And Isaiah prophesies that it will all be brought about by a ruler unlike any the world has seen since Solomon.

Whereas last week we witnessed the humble power of a brutalized servant- Christ as suffering servant- that would transform the world by his faithful and loving submission unto death, today we take up a new image of the one who would draw the world unto him, not through his suffering in death but in his power in life. Though the paradox does not seem as strong as the subversion of gaining life through death, by the standard of the world righteousness and faithfulness do not exactly win out every time in the politics of power and priorities among leaders. But this leader, this king to end all kings, would be bestowed with a power that is not defined by the number of weapons in his nuclear arsenal, or the amount of foot soldiers guarding his palace, or the extent to which he is renowned and feared for his brutality to dissidents or traitors to the cause. He would not cause a stir because of the number of states that supported him, or by the valor of his military career. But his power would lie in the spirit of the Lord that rests upon him - a

simple spirit-but a spirit bestowing soul piercing wisdom and an understanding that would diminish the knowledge of any kingdom - a mighty judge gifted with a counsel that would level sinners with one word of his mouth in the immense quality of the truth he spoke. And he would use his power not for personal gain or a flashy resume, or for belittling colleagues or placing himself on the moral highroad, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. His delight shall be not in trying to become God but in the fear of the Lord. I don't know about you, but I don't recall hearing these phrases on any campaign trail. The peaceful kingdom indeed, where the Lion shall live with the Lamb and gosh, Isaiah, I would love to believe you, I want to believe that this can be true, but where is it?

I tasted that bitter medicine of indifference this week. I call it medicine because it has the power to wake you up and search within yourself for healing when you are startled by its potency and that awful churning when its reality hits your stomach. And I'll be honest, it came reading this passage and confronting my own reactions to what seems like an impossible prospect for peace that Isaiah offers. Marks of that broken world are all around us and we become so enmeshed with that brokenness that I, at least, totter on the brink of losing sight of the fact that we were ever supposed to be whole.

The Christmas season comes with an infusion of holiday joy and festive décor in an otherwise banal workplace of grays and neutrals, but does it not also come with a bit of an embarrassed sigh of relief for a distraction from such pervasive and streaming headlines as 'war,' 'terror,' the highest death toll of soldiers since April-massive demonstrations of angry masses in the Ukraine, bitter debate of Iraqi factions, gunned down Palestinian schoolgirl in Gaza, need for prescription anti-depressants soars, pre-Christmas rounds of layoffs and racism in the hearts of civic leaders?

Thanks for the prophesy, Isaiah, but what does that mean for us today? What does that mean for us when we confront what Bill Wood calls 'the dark side of Christmas,' when the hope of the holiday Season encounters the realities of our world and we are caught in the middle? When we, from our Wednesday Worship vantage experience, again, the tension of a week that holds Pearl Harbor Remembrance and Hanukkah. The one, commemorating a surprise attack killing roughly 2400 and injuring half that number on a day that will live in infamy. The other beginning a celebration of a miracle God performed for eight days, and the deliverance of a people from oppressors. It seems like an impossible tension, the Lion shall live with the Lamb. It seems like an impossible prophesy.

I don't know about you, but I am ready to experience this peaceful kingdom. I am ready to see the face of its leader, to be startled by the winds of change that will blow a true peace and goodwill forever into the hearts of all people and will reform the Christmas season from a glint of hope in the routine of the world to a light that drives back the darkness around us not just for four weeks or a day, but every day. Prophesy for me, Isaiah, the hour in which the child will lead them, and the young of predator and prey will lie down together, when the leopard will lie down with the lamb because to be perfectly honest, all I see right now is that lamb running for his life, and the shepherd is

no where to be seen..

It is no mistake that the purple cloth the church designates to hang during Advent is the same one that hangs during Lent and Holy Week. It is the color of royalty, for in advent we celebrate the birth of a new king, a little child that would lead the nations. But the celebration of the child's birth is intrinsically interconnected with his suffering before Easter and death. As we celebrate Christ's Advent, literally, his 'coming' or 'arrival' in history by faith we are also called to hope in the promise of a second Advent beyond his death, the coming of Christ to draw all of creation unto him, who shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear, who will rule with the spirit of counsel and might, and righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and the lion shall live with the lamb. This purple cloth hangs to signify a continuity in our faith as the child king was bestowed the honor of the suffering servant, and he will come again in glory and restore creation to the perfection that Isaiah prophesied. It calls us back to the mind bending reality of Christ in the world, and all that would mean for him and for us.

So if the tension feels real to you, if the prophesy of Isaiah of an Advent that will rock the world with peace raises a question in your mind, or you find difficulty reconciling what it means that we have faith that God became flesh and abolished the power of sin over us and yet we experience sin and brokenness still today, then you are doing something very right. Because that tension, that simultaneous celebration of what has already been accomplished in Christ and anticipation of what is yet to come is exactly what this season is all about. It is about a holy child born into a hostile world, who did not transform the nature of suffering or death itself, but did transform its power over us. Who did not take away the reality of our brokenness, but gave a living testimony that God is present with us in it and is working in the Spirit of Christ to make us whole, who promises that no amount of suffering, or war, or indifference, or uncertainty or trial that we face will ever have the last word because of Advent. Christ coming.

Christ born unto the world ... Christ present with us today, Christ yet to come to accomplish so much more. It is Advent hope that Isaiah speaks of, that we celebrate- a hope for a people that has been established in history by a faithful God, a hope that sustains us today as a light in the darkness that surrounds us, that calls us back to where we have been. Advent hope that goes before us along the way, and gives voice to the prophets that the best is yet to come for all of creation in its life in Christ. When they will not hurt or destroy on all God's holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Amen.