

The Spirit of the Lord

Isaiah 11:1-10

With the exception of the white dove, it is difficult to come up with a more iconic image of future peace than that of a wolf lying down with a lamb. The idea of predator lying down with prey has the power to thrill us, to move and delight us. Some people send each other videos of a rat who rides on the back of a cat who rides on the back of a dog, or pictures of a tiger nursing piglets, or articles about a lioness adopting antelope calves. We recognize something profound in these reports. They signify hope.

These pictures strike us because they are so rare. If every lion took care of baby antelopes, it would not be news. Likewise, the parade of animal friends Isaiah shows us is remarkable because of its absurdity: wolf with lamb, leopard with kid, calf and lion, cow and bear, and little children playing without fear. Even snakes do not bite. If even animals can override bloody instinct, how might we humans do the same?

We ask...is this a prophecy or a fairy tale? Isaiah's declaration stands in direct contrast to the terror and brutality that pervade our world and inform our decisions, both personal and corporate. We are acquainted with fear and violence. News of terrorism, war, economic collapse, and climate catastrophe can instill a deep sense of anxiety among all of us. Some of us are acquainted by experience with violence many can scarcely imagine. We know about the power of violence to wreck lives. What lions have ravaged those in the congregation? What snakes coil hidden in our lives, threatening to strike? It may be our neighbors from the abyss...it may be people with guns who want to use them against your family members.

We are particularly fragile when it comes to Isaiah's images of vulnerable children living and playing in safety. Our fear for children's safety and future is real! Some of

us have had our children injured or taken from us. For some of us this grief is not confined to the loss of near ones. It is not just something that happened at Sandy Hook. We are also intimately acquainted with suffering children through heartbreaking images broadcast via the electronic media. This produces its own brand of grief.

Isaiah's word is for all, but collectively we bring our grief into this place of worship. I know this because of our prayer requests. Isaiah promises future security; but how might this be a word of hope for those of us from whom security has already been stolen? Answers are not easy. Is Isaiah's word also a word of security for *now*, for us living in unstable and frightening times, and not just a word about a secure future? According to Isaiah, the transformation from a culture of fear to a world at peace begins with a stump. Out of something that appeared finished, lifeless, left behind, comes the sign of new life—a green sprig. This is how hope gets its start—it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place.

Think for a moment... examine where the stumps are in your own life; where do you feel cut off? Can you imagine or believe that even now God might be nurturing the growth of something new and good from your old, dead dreams? Consider what areas of your life most need the promise of new life, and how you might become open to such newness. Isaiah's promise is not just a future one; even now there are tiny signs of hope and life in places that look dead and discarded.

Of course Isaiah's promise is not meant as a merely personal one. The coming king will receive the spirit of the Lord. In 1 Samuel, both Saul and David are anointed by the prophet Samuel and immediately receive God's spirit (1 Sam. 10:10; 16:13). Being possessed of God's spirit is a mark of God's anointed one. Verse 2 exposes us to various attributes of this empowerment by God's spirit. These include association with "wisdom and understanding," with "counsel and might," and with "knowledge

and the fear of the LORD." These are attributes to be highly desired in a hoped-for ruler; in the coming prince of peace.

Such an expected one will not rely solely on the immediate impression of his senses (eyes and ears), but will rely on the qualities of covenant commitment, righteousness and equity. What Isaiah proclaims the coming reign of God, which we read through our Christian lens as the coming of Christ. The little shoot will rise to be a new kind of king, one who judges with righteousness and brings justice for the poor and the meek. He manifests a power unlike any other, and his power is for the weak. From this declaration proceeds the vivid vision of the peaceable kingdom, a compelling portrayal of both aggression and weakness overturned.

Most of us can relate to feelings of both weakness and aggression. Most of us have felt preyed upon at one time or another; most of us have sometimes been the predator as well. Though Isaiah speaks of a future time when predator and prey will feast and rest together, his vision can have transformative implications now, if we allow the possibility of conversion in our own lives. Think again of those areas in your life where you feel weak, as well as those areas where you may be prone to aggression or even violence.

Are the predators the only ones to be transformed? Why not also their former victims? The predators have lost all interest in eating them, having crossed over to join them in vegetarianism; but does conversion apply only to the powerful? Why not also their former victims? So why not imagine a purring lion beside a calf who has learned to roar, and a wolf wagging its tail in the company of a brave, lion-hearted lamb? On Saturday I met with the National Hispanic Pastor's board in Indianapolis. They expressed frustration because of a perceived power struggle with the structures of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). At lunch I told some of the leaders the story of the women's struggle for self determination within a covenant

relationship. Just about the time a group of women leaders began to understand the extent of their influence they were replaced by another group of leaders. However on the night before my election as president of the International Christian Women's Fellowship I was informed that all the staff would be fired or retire. Therefore, after two years of in-the-position learning we had a meeting with church leaders who told us we had power and the right to self determination. Then we had a call with women church leaders who encouraged us to formulate plans for how we would live our lives differently and share the power rather than beg for what we wanted. 4 years later, after prayer and planning things changed. Now women have a seat at tables where decisions are made. Now I'm not saying that the structure of the church is a wolf – nor that the women were sheep, but sometimes that the way it felt!

In the Etheridge family, the fourth child of our blended family was shoot 10 years ago and will always carry the results of his injury. We had to deal with the police, hospitals, doctors, social service agencies wanting to see my son as a victim rather than a person with a sound mind and about to make responsible choices. Though this experience our son Robert found the Spirit of the Lord for himself and knows that the Lord's Spirit has made a difference in his life!

Advent is a good time for reexamining our old assumptions and definitions, including how we think of and use power. In Christ, power has been reinterpreted. How might our own lives be reinterpreted in his light? How might our own lives be remade—so that the wolf and the lamb within us live together in a new kind of harmony? Our own lives can become peaceable kingdoms when subjected to the judgment and transformation of Christ.

Isaiah spoke from his current situation, indicating that Assyria will fall like a tree that will never sprout again. However, the scene changes when he turns to the house of David. Although David's house is falling, also like a tree, from its roots a branch

will sprout. All is not lost for the people of Judah, because from the Davidic line will emerge a king of peace whose reign will be one of peace and righteousness. A second David will emerge from the line of his ancestors to usher in a time of peace.

The renewal of the Davidic reign is not merely a human possibility but a divine gift, because this will be effected by the spirit of the Lord. As great as David was, the hope that God will renew Judah is not limited to the Davidic line but is rooted in the new life that the spirit of the Lord makes possible. A king will emerge from Bethlehem who will lead his people with "wisdom and understanding," "counsel and might," "knowledge and the fear of the LORD" (v. 2); all gifts that are endowed by God. The coming one, the promised prince of peace, will be the bearer of the spirit of the Lord.

The hope of the people is expressed in Psalm 72:1-2: "Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice." Like Solomon the new leader will be skilled in knowledge and the gift of discernment (1 Kgs. 3:9). However, knowledge this is coupled with the fear of God and not knowledge for its own sake; knowledge that points to the acknowledgment of God and the superiority of the ways of God. The promise that the king of peace will embody and make possible is one in which the whole creation will participate. The sign and signal of the new day will be the appearance of this new king who will restore the Davidic line, ushering in the realm in which God's knowledge will cover the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (v. 9).

This hope is larger and more obviously divine than a monarchy in Judah. The promised salvation will not come through human intervention but through divine action, in which the rights of the poor and the frail members of society will be respected.

In this wonderful vision of peace inaugurated by the Messiah, the entire creation participates. The place of peace will be the holy mountain of God, and the land will be filled with the knowledge of God. The realm of God will shine through the witness and mission of the church as the poor have good news preached to them and are judged with righteousness and equity. The Messiah awaits the church in a future of righteousness marked off by the gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of God, beckoning the church to a new future not of its own making but one made possible by the Spirit of the Lord. The challenge is not to be stuck in the traditions of the past but to be open to the new realm in which the proud will be punished, the humble will be exalted, and the practice of justice will be the order of a new day. **Noel Leo Erskine**

Isaiah is clear that we are not the ones who usher in a new era; it is God who brings it forth. Some would therefore say that Isaiah's call is a call not to action but to hope; but hope, in the end, *is* action, with the power to overturn old assumptions and sad cynicism, to give us new eyes, and to heal our warring hearts. **Stacey Simpson Duke and Bruce C. Birch**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.