



Lexington Presbyterian Church

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The Source of Our Hope

Isaiah 11:1-10

A sermon by William M. Klein

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1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 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. 3 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; 4 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. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 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. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 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. 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. (Is. 11:1-10 NRSV)

1

What strikes you about the vision Isaiah saw? What strikes me is it's **scope**. Who would dare imagine that in the working out of God's purpose all God's creatures will live in harmony?¹ The more common life-experience is disharmony, isn't it?

We can't manage to live in harmony with those closest to us – our families, friends, neighbors. In fact, it may be that nations have a better chance of achieving unity than do people who see each other every day. And we all know "peace accords" among nations are fragile.

Within religious traditions – Islam, for example – Sunni and Shia don't appear to share much affection.² Tensions within Jewish and Christian traditions can be fierce. As battles ensue within Protestant dominations over doctrinal differences, often there seems to be a "take no prisoners" attitude.

I didn't think it possible...but the political divide within this country grows wider. There seems to be no common ground...at least none anyone will admit for the record for fear of vicious reprisal. Can even God bring harmony out of such discord?

To help frame the sheer magnitude of what God will do, Isaiah uses metaphor to talk about how mortal enemies who will live peaceably. The lamb and the wolf will live harmoniously. The lamb, generally food for the wolf, is instinctually (and for good reason) suspicious of the wolf. The future God is bringing to pass will be so radically different, it will be as if the lamb and wolf will live together in harmony. Sadducee, Pharisee, and Essene will live together in harmony. Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, Anarchist, and Independent will live together in harmony.

Isaiah's fanciful vision continues. Watchful adults need not worry about a nursing child playing near a deadly cobra. Human baby and cobra as playmates! It is a vision of a world that is "out of this world."

How will such a future come to pass? According to Isaiah, God alone is capable of pulling-off such a vision in which hunter and hunted will not hurt, destroy, or even fear one another. Traditional enemies will live in harmony because the earth will be saturated with the knowledge of the Lord. A God-given unity will define our relations one with another, as well as with the whole creation.³ There will be no need to study war anymore.⁴

2

Isaiah's vision is so wildly unlikely that it makes us wonder if he was feasting on magic mushrooms. It seems all the more harebrained when you realize the implications of what Isaiah said God intends to do.

When Isaiah said the lamb and the wolf will live in harmony, notice what he did not say. He did not say the wolf would become a lamb or that the lamb would become a wolf in order for them to live in harmony. Each would stay what it was. The wolf would remain a wolf. The lamb would remain a lamb. Each would remain completely different...yet live in harmony. That, my friends, is what makes Isaiah's vision so radical.

We are practiced at noticing what makes us different. He doesn't look like me, has funny ideas about God, practices his faith in a way that is foreign to me, faces East and bows his head five times a day. She wears her hair in an odd way, speaks in a foreign tongue, shares a life with someone of the same gender.

In our culture "different" is not just different. In our culture "different" is "Not OK." It is viewed as suspicious, as dangerous, as wrong. In order for us to have anything approaching harmony, he must give up his distinctiveness and embrace our ways. She must become one of us.

Isaiah says the wolf will remain a wolf...the lamb will remain a lamb...and in spite of that remarkably permanent difference, they will live in harmony. It is inconceivable. Indeed, it is inconceivable...save for the purposes of God. Through the sheer gravity of God's grace, traditional enemies will live in harmony. It is God's intention that his creation become saturated with harmony...and that God fulfills what God proposes.⁵

What, then, are we supposed to do with this vision of the future God will bring to pass? Since it is clear neither we nor our enemies are inclined to budge in what we each believe to be incontrovertible truth, how is Isaiah's vision supposed to affect us today? Are we really supposed to focus more on what unites us than upon what divides? If we do not fiercely defend what makes us different, won't we soon be conquered and our way of life be destroyed? Are we supposed to begin living as if God's intended harmony is an accomplished fact, come what may...to really turn the other cheek, to really lend with no thought of charging interest, to seek to serve rather than to be served? Is this to be a unilateral commitment...to go about our business as if Christ actually died for every solitary person we meet...to treat everyone as if he or she is an adopted brother or sister, as beloved by our heavenly Father as was Jesus and, by his grace, as are we?

I suppose the question is this: Does being faithful to God mean we ignore Isaiah's vision in order to accommodate the real world? Or are we to let his vision shape who we are and redefine what the real world looks like by a different light?

2

Now it is story time. This is not overtly a Christmas story. But it is certainly an incarnational story...a story about the power of Christ...and transformation...and what can happen when Christ is born in us, in this congregation, in this community. It is a story about living by a different light. It's a story I shared with you a number of years ago...and to quote the great preacher Fred Craddock, if a story is not worth telling twice it is not worth telling once. I had to share it again.

This particular story comes out of Grapevine, Texas. The town is almost 90% white, has a \$90,000 median family income, and award-winning schools like Faith Christian School. Like most towns in Texas, Grapevine takes its high school football seriously. Faith's football team, for example, has 70 players, 11 coaches, the latest equipment, and hordes of involved parents. In November 2008, the Faith Lions were 7-2 going into the game with the Gainesville State Tornados.

Gainesville State, on the other hand, headed into the game with a record of 0-8, having scored only two touchdowns all year. Gainesville's 14 players wore seven-year-old pads and dilapidated helmets and were escorted by 20 security guards who took off the players' handcuffs before the game. Gainesville State, a maximum security prison north of Dallas, gets its students by court order. Many Tornados have convictions for drugs, assaults, and robberies. Many of their families have disowned them. They play every game on the road.

Before the game, Faith's head coach Kris Hogan had an idea. What if, just for one night, half of the Faith fans cheered for the kids on the opposing team? "Here is the message I want you to send," Hogan wrote in an email to Faith's faithful fans. "You are just as valuable as any other person in the Planet Earth." The Faith fans agreed.

When the Gainesville Tornados took the field, they crashed through a banner made by Faith fans that read, "Go Tornados!" The Gainesville players were surprised to find themselves running through a 40-foot spirit line made up of cheering fans. From their benches at the side of the field, the Gainesville team heard 200 fans on the bleachers behind them, cheering for them by name, led by real cheerleaders. Coach Hogan had recruited the JV squad to cheer for the opposing team.

"I thought maybe they were confused," said Alex, a Gainesville lineman. Another lineman, Gerald, said: "We can tell people are a little afraid of us when we come to the games... But these people, they were yellin' **for us!** By our names!" Gainesville's quarterback and middle linebacker, Isaiah, shook his head in disbelief. "I never thought I'd hear people cheering for us to hit their kids... But they wanted us to!"

At the end of the game (Faith won, 33-14), the Tornados (the losing team) practically danced off the field with their fingers pointing #1 in the air. They gave Gainesville's head coach Mark Williams what ESPN sportswriter Rick Reilly described as the first Gatorade bath in history for a 0-9 coach.

When the teams gathered in the middle of the field to pray, Isaiah surprised everybody by asking to lead. Coach Hogan said he had no idea what the kid was going to say. This was Isaiah's prayer: "Lord, I don't know how this happened, so I don't know how to say thank You, but I never would've known there was so many people in the world that cared about us."

As guards escorted the Tornados back to their bus, each player received a bag filled with burgers, fries, candy, a Bible, and an encouraging letter from a Faith player. Before he stepped onto the bus, Coach Williams turned and grabbed Coach Hogan hard by the shoulders, and said: "You'll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You'll never, ever know."

The Gainesville players crowded onto one side of the bus, peering out the windows at an unbelievable sight - people they had never met before smiling at them, waving goodbye, as the bus drove into the night.

The whole experience was, according to Rick Reilly, like, "Rivers running uphill and cats petting dogs" - or, as another Isaiah put it, "The wolf living with the lamb, the leopard lying down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together...and a little child leading them."⁶

4

It is a beautiful story. I love stories like this...but it is the kind of story that makes the skeptic in us say, "Well, that is a nice story but it was a one-time thing. That's the end of it." Skepticism is wisdom, right? Problem is skepticism also has a way of being a roadblock to incarnation.

So...listen to what happened one year later. The Gainesville Tornados still had a terrible season. They did win one game rather than zero. But when they came back to Faith Christian School at Grapevine, TX, they ran through a 150 foot spirit line this time, found their team name painted in team colors in one of the end zones, and played the game before 4000 cheering fans and television crews.

Just as important, several other high schools on the game roster, having read about Faith Christian High School's generosity, replicated the gesture when the Tornados played at their schools. The incarnational imagination of the coaches, players, parents, and students at Faith Christian High School bore fruit...game after game multiplied Christ's self-giving love. As sports writer David Thomas put it, "If a Texas high school football field can be a place where unconditional love can be offered and received, then any place can."⁷

5

What a story. It is a story that fills us with wonder and gratitude...and hope. Advent is a season to hope, isn't it...hope that there really will be an unimaginable invasion...an invasion of holiness. Through faith we believe what is coming upon us is the Light of the World...the Christ. That hope is our comfort and joy. It is also our challenge because the Light has not yet come. Only the hope for it has come...only the longing for it. In the meantime we are in the dark...so much darkness. We watch and wait for the holiness to heal us and hallow us...and to liberate us from the dark.⁸

The 2011 preacher for the *Montreat Worship and Music Conference* was Thomas H. Troeger, a pastor and professor. He preached a sermon that week on our Isaiah passage. He also had the 500-voice adult choir sing a hymn he wrote about the dream Isaiah saw. It was written in memory of those who perished on 9/11/01. I want to conclude this morning by sharing the hymn's final verse and chorus...because it captures our hope this Advent.

4

Nature reordered to match God's intent,
nations obeying the call to repent,
all of creation completely restored,
filled with the knowledge and love of the Lord.

Little child whose bed is straw,
take new lodgings in my heart.
Bring the dream Isaiah saw:
justice purifying law.⁹

Amen



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Endnotes:

¹ Consider the hymn, *God Is Working His Purpose Out*.

² See <http://www.nvcc.edu/home/lshulman/Religions/Islam/index6.html>. There are just two major divisions within Islam: Sunni (following the Sunnah or traditions of the Prophet) and Shia (those in the "party" of Ali). This division is primarily one of politics rather than a difference over theology or practice (although Shia and other Muslims do have additional practices unique to varying cultures, the basics are agreed upon). The division began soon after Muhammad died when a debate waged over who was to be the legitimate successor (Caliph) to the Prophet. The majority of Muslims felt it should be one elected from amongst Muhammad's closest followers. But there was a minority who felt Muhammad had indicated that it should be Ali, his cousin and son-in-law. This "party" (shi'i) of Ali rejected the first three elected Caliphs until Ali was elected as the fourth. Ali became the first recognized Imam (spiritual leader) for the Shia (Shi'ite) Muslims and, from then on, they continued to recognize a series of twelve such Imams until the last one disappeared in the ninth century. Most Shia Muslims await the return of this "Hidden Imam" (called al-Madhi) and some believe he will be the herald of the return of Jesus. (The Baha'i faith, which grew out of Shi'ite Islam in 19th century Persia, believe the Imam returned in the person of the Bab ["gate"]. They base their religion on the teachings of the new "manifestation" of God - Baha'u'llah ["Glory of God"] heralded by his return.) The majority of Shia Muslims are found in Iran and surrounding countries and consist of no more than 15% of all Muslims. Around 80% of remaining Muslims are Sunni but vary considerably depending on where they are - in Egypt and Turkey they are more liberal, in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan they are more conservative. Yet, the countries with the largest population of Muslims are outside the Middle East: in India and Indonesia!

³ See Romans 8:22.

⁴ See Isaiah 2:4.

⁵ See Ephesians 1:3-14.

⁶ Dean, Kendra Creasy. 2010. *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers Is Telling the American Church*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 85-87. Cited from: Reilly, Rick. 2008. "There Are Some Games When Cheering for the Other Side Feels Better Than Winning," *ESPH: The Magazine*, December 28 issue. Thanks to Deb Klein for directing me to this story.

⁷ Dean, 105. Cited from: Thomas, David. 2009. "Impact of This Game on Players' Lives Can't Be Overstated," *Dallas-Fort worth Star-Telegram*, Nov. 7 issue.

⁸ Buechner, Frederick. 1992. *Listening to Your Life*. NY: HarperCollins Pub., 314-315.

⁹ Troeger, Thomas H. 2004. *The Dream Isaiah Saw*. (For Mixed Choir (SATB), piano, and organ) Words by Troeger. Music by Glenn L. Rudolph. University of Oxford Press.