

Second Sunday of Advent

December 9, 2007

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*Scriptures: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7,18-19; Romans 5:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12*

I want to take the passage from Isaiah as my text for preaching today. That's one of the advantages of being in one congregation for a while, you get to the place where you have preached on this or that Gospel text a few times before, so you are freer to focus more closely on some other passages. The Isaiah text in question is the one that talks about the shoot that will come out from the stump of Jesse, someone will rise up out of the lineage of King David to be a new King, to bring back the glory of former days.

In this short little passage, the prophet Isaiah is spelling out just what sort of leader this new person will be and what sort of society his leadership will create. In one translation I have verse 5 reads, "Each morning he will pull on sturdy work clothes and boots, and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land."

The second part of the passage is a description of the kind of world that will result; told to us in images, powerful images of peace: the wolf will 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." These images are so powerful we see them over and over. I have a Christmas t-shirt that has the lion laying down with the lamb. Actually, if you read carefully, it never actually says the lion lies down with the lamb. Not in Isaiah, and not anywhere else I could find. But I think we all like alliteration too much, so lion and lamb it is.

Whatever the case, the pattern is the same: the powerful one is the lion, the wolf, the bear, some predator. And the not-so-powerful one, the lamb, the kid, the calf, the toddler or infant, each one of them vulnerable, easy prey to a predator. But this time, under the sway of this new leader, things are different. The predator doesn't gobble up the prey. The one with power doesn't use it to hurt the one who is weak and vulnerable.

"And they shall 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." This is probably one of my most favorite images, and it must have been special to Isaiah too, since it is written twice, once in Chapter 11 and again in Chapter 65. When Gretchen was a little girl, she was quite the artist, crayons were her medium of choice. Once, I don't remember how old she was, she drew this wonderful picture of a bird, in its nest, with its babies, singing. I had it framed, and captioned with verses from Isaiah. That picture captured so beautifully the dream that is God's dream for us, this holy mountain where they shall not hurt or destroy; where the earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord.

We don't spend much time talking about this particular theme, the knowledge of the Lord, although it recurs pretty frequently in the Old Testament, especially the prophets. Knowledge is one of those Hebrew words with multiple meanings. It can mean the awareness of something, the experience of something, or the acknowledgement of something. When Isaiah speaks of a time when the earth is full of the knowledge of the

Lord, he is speaking of a time when all people are aware of God impact, experience God's presence and acknowledge God's sovereignty in their lives.

Think for a minute what that might mean for us today, if we all lived lives in which we were totally aware of all that God was up to in our lives, if we were completely attuned to the experience of God in our lives, if we fully acknowledged God by how we lived our lives. What would that look like? Who do I know that seems to me to live fully the knowledge of the Lord? And what, if anything would that have to do with lions lying down with lambs?

Those were the thoughts and questions that had been swirling in my head when I was working on this sermon earlier this week when I was listening to NPR. I think they were doing a report on Mit Romney and his announcement about his faith. But they had a quote from John McCain, someone I don't always agree with, but for whom I have a great deal of respect. McCain was telling the story of one of his experiences as a POW during the Vietnam war.

He recounted how, as a scared American prisoner of war in Vietnam, he had been tied in torture ropes by his tormentors and left alone in an empty room to suffer through the night. Later in the evening, a guard he had never spoken to entered the room and silently loosened the ropes to relieve his suffering. Just before morning, that same guard came back and re-tightened the ropes before his less humanitarian comrades returned. The guard never said a word to McCain. Some months later on a Christmas morning, as McCain stood alone in the prison courtyard, that same guard walked up to him and stood next to him for a few moments. Then with his sandal, the guard drew a cross in the dirt. They stood wordlessly there for a minute or two, venerating the cross, until the guard rubbed it out and walked away.

To me, that prison guard was one who was living his knowledge of the Lord, By his actions, at some risk to his own person, he acknowledged God by his actions. And that's when it occurred to me what these two parts of the passage from Isaiah have to do with each other. In that moment, when the guard loosened the torture ropes, the lion laid down with the lamb. That guard set aside his power, his capacity to hurt and destroy. Just for a few hours, the lion, the one with the power, the one with the gun, laid down with the vulnerable one, the lamb.

Thinking then, ahead to more recent events, how does this text apply? Where might we see this text happening in the world right now? The first question we have to think through to answer that is, who is the lion? Who is the lamb? Can we recognize when we are the lion, the bear, the wolf? In order to be part of God's peace, God's dream, I think that is the critical piece. We have to be able to see when we are the ones who are devouring the weak, the vulnerable.

I think of the soldier who reported the abuses in Iraq in the Abu Graib prison. There was a soldier, a lion, who for just an instant was able to see in those prisoners, not some horrible, dangerous adversaries to be feared and punished, but lambs. And for just a moment in there he was able to live out the knowledge of the Lord, to act in ways the acknowledged a God of love, compassion, justice,

The reason we read these Isaiah texts during Advent is that we believe that the One who is the shoot from the stump of Jesse is also the baby who was laid in a manger in a stable. It is he who revealed God to us. More than was possible through mere words on a page, through Jesus we became aware of God's goodness. Through Jesus, humankind experienced God's goodness, God's healing power and God's infinite forgiveness. And through Jesus we are called to acknowledge God in our own lives, by how we live, by how we treat other people, by how we use our power. Through Jesus we are called to be part of God's dream, to be part of the holy mountain where none hurt or destroy.