

(Isaiah 11:1-10 NRSV)

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.

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The Wolf Shall Live With the Lamb

A sermon preached at North-Prospect United Church of Christ, Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Text: Isaiah 11:1-10.

The theme for this second Sunday of Advent is dreaming. And that may sound exactly like what Isaiah is doing when he writes this morning's passage. Isaiah has a dream, a vision of a world in which equity and justice are the rule of the day, a world in which even natural enemies – the lion and the ox, the leopard and the kid, the wolf and the lamb – a world in which even these unlikely pairings live side by side without enmity. And we are likely to say such a world sounds nice, but isn't it just a pipe-dream? Isn't it just a fantasy? Isn't it just religion talking, religion with its head in the clouds with no grounding in reality?

After all, we know human nature better than that. We know reality better than that. This is a hard and competitive world. If you're a lamb, you had better look out for the wolf. If you're an ox, you better not think of trusting the lion. Does anyone really believe that you can trust Saddam Hussein, that you can just coexist with him without keeping the Gulf full of weapons? Such naive fantasy is surely concocted by the foolish. We know that the world is run by the powerful. And we know that the powerful never give up their power if they don't have to. And those who don't have the power are trying to get it.

Life seems to leave us stuck with but two projects, whether we're individuals, corporations or nations: First, get and hold onto enough power to get the things we want out of life. Second, prevent those we most fear from getting enough power to hurt us or take things away from us. Whether you're talking about the Israelis and the Palestinians, the US and Iraq, Microsoft and its competitors, or the co-worker you are competing with for a promotion, the concept prevails: Get as much as you can and prevent your opponent from doing the same thing. Any talk of wolves and lambs living together in harmony is quite simply, well, simpleminded. You had better, to get what you want in life, you had better be ready to fight for it and ready to fight to keep it.

*** Getting what you want in life, getting what you want out of life. Maybe before we get to the means to get there, we might spend a little time reflecting about this idea. What do you want out of life?

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Buddhists say that what we all want out of life is happiness, to get off the endless wheel of suffering. Christians Patricia Killen and John De Beer writing in *The Art of Theological Reflection* say that what we want more than anything is to make meaning out of life, to make sense of it. In many respects the Christians and the Buddhists are on the same wave length. Indeed, most religious traditions are if we look deeply enough. Happiness and meaning, are they not what all of us want?

But we have this paradigm that we believe. We believe the world operates essentially by a dog eat dog point of view. We think anything else is naive.

So, the question to put to it, the question to put to this paradigm of dog eat dog, is this, even if you are the dog doing the eating, even if you are on top today, have you found happiness? Have you found meaning in your life? Surely, if you're the dog getting eaten today you haven't. But even if you're winning, has even winning delivered happiness, or meaning to you? If it has, the rest of what I have to say this morning isn't for you. If you've found happiness and meaning by being top dog in your life, the more power to you, so to speak. If you've found meaning and happiness in the dog eat dog paradigm, you should keep right on doing what you're doing. I don't think I've ever met anyone who has, but, heck, you might be the first. Go for it.

For the rest of us, though, there is a problem here. If, on the one hand, our deepest yearnings are for happiness and meaning and, on the other hand, the way we are certain we must live almost never delivers happiness and meaning, we need to look elsewhere.

And look elsewhere we do. As a culture we are turning more than ever to spiritual things to get what our dog eat dog world doesn't give us. On the road where my brother lives, way up in the woods in western Massachusetts, there is a retreat center. During the summer months, when the retreat center runs, a steady stream of BMWs, Lexuses, and other expensive automotive nameplates goes up the road carrying young men and women, themselves decked out in t-shirts that say Microsoft or Apple or some other company that signifies they have made it. They drive up the road, headed to ten day retreats, in search of something spiritual, in search of something missing in their day-to-day, dog eat dog world – in search of happiness and meaning.

But Isaiah wants to pose them an unsettling question to them, and us. What if it's not just that the dog eat dog world doesn't give us happiness and meaning? What if happiness and meaning can't simply be added on by a spiritual pursuit? What if living in a dog eat dog way precludes any lasting happiness and meaning at all? What if the paradigm by which we think the world must operate isn't just lacking the features to give us happiness and meaning? What if it actually prevents it from happening?

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Oh what a mess we've gotten ourselves into. We struggle and compete to get ahead, or at least to not get trampled on, because we see that as the only way to get what we want out of life. When that fails to get us what we want, we say, Okay, let's add on a spiritual piece; that's what must be missing. So we'll meditate or pray or go to church. We'll add those things to our lives to see if they help, to see if they give us what is missing.

Then Isaiah whispers into our ear. He says, You know what I think. I think it won't work until we get a different world, until we get a world where the wolf and the lamb live together, where it's no longer dog eat dog.

He whispers that into our ears, and we say, There is no such world. Only dreamers, and we don't mean that as a compliment, only dreamers think there can be a world that isn't dog eat dog.

Maybe that is right. For the moment, on this second Sunday of Advent, we have but the dream, and perhaps a foolish one at that. But this dream conjures up other images, faint memories, fleeting yet familiar sentences.

"In those days there went out a decree from Emperor Augustus."

For now these sentences are but faint whispers, incomplete, their full stories hidden behind the veil, behind the windows of the Advent calendar, yet to be pried open. But the fragments are there, softly pulsing, like the heartbeat in our temples.

"She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in a manger."

The pieces of familiar sentences are there, softly insistent every time we say there can be no world where equity and justice rule, when we say there can be no world where the wolf no longer ravages the lamb. The dream and the stories yet to come, to which the dream points, throws a counter-doubt at us. Are we so sure such a world cannot be?

"Where is this child who has been born king of the Jews, for we observed his star at its rising."

Are we sure this cannot be? Or, ought we be even more sure that lacking such a world, our deepest yearnings for happiness and meaning are destined to be forever vacant?

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch of their flock by night."

These faint whispers beckon like distant drums, or like a voice calling us out of a dream. But this dream and this voice which calls us from the dream seem of one mind. The reality upon awaking is that which the dream has painted:

"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." Perhaps this dream is more real than we had thought. Amen.

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