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Isaiah 11: 1-10

Matthew 3: 1-12

God Things Come

“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling together;
and a little child will lead them.” (Isaiah 11: 6)

On my last and ultimate Sunday in this pulpit, I find it extremely interesting
that the Hebrew lectionary text that God has given us for today
is almost identical to the lectionary lesson God gave us on
my penultimate Sunday on November 17 from Isaiah 65: 17;
both dealing with God’s vision of a peaceable kingdom.

I could ignore it, and say, “Oh, I preached about that the last time;
I’ve already said all that I need to say about that.”

Or I could laugh it off as mere coincidence, and preach from another selection.

Or, as I have chosen to do, I am considering it as providential
and a sign from God, to be taken seriously and not to be ignored.

Perhaps we can’t preach enough about God’s peaceable kingdom in
in the polarized climate of this day and time.

What would our world look like, I wonder:

if the donkey would lie down with the elephant, in peace;
if the 1% would live with the poor, in peace;
if the fox and the peacock would tell their stories, in peace;

if the black lives matters advocates and white supremacists would march
together, for peace;

if the LGBTQIA+ community and Hobby Lobby could craft together, in peace;

if the NRA and the pacifists would beat swords into plowshares, in peace;

if the United Daughters of the Confederacy and the sons of Antifa
would build statues, in peace;

if the Tarheels fans and the Blue Devil fans could cheer together, in peace;

and if little refugee children might lead us all to peace?

I think this is what the Lord requires us to imagine, with our prophetic imaginations.

For if we can imagine a thoroughly healed and peaceful creation,

then, perhaps, we can work backwards from that point to see what it would

take to manifest such a harmonious place,

sans aggression or predation, sans harm or destruction.

As we were leaving the sanctuary after John Weicher's beautiful installation service

that Sunday afternoon, Mickey Velkey leaned over and said to me,

"Do you know what my favorite word is in the vows that John took?"

And she paused for a second, like I was supposed to read her mind and guess

the one word she was thinking of.

"It's 'imagination!'" she said. "I think that is the most important quality for a leader

to possess. 'Imagination!'"

Maybe good things come to those who wait, but *God things* come to those

who possess the prophetic imagination to hope for,

seek and manifest God's alternative way of being in this world.

Speaking of a little child leading us, my grandson received a game for his sixth birthday called *Dinosaur Escape*.

It's a game for young children, age 5+, which I had a hard time figuring out.

For, you see, the object of the game is not to win, in the traditional sense,

but to get all three dinosaurs to Dinosaur Island before the volcano erupts;

and everyone has to work together to move those dinosaurs

around the board before it is too late.

I like it because no one owns a dinosaur; you can move any dinosaur on the board,

in peace.

You can roll the dice and move the dinosaurs forwards or backwards,

in peace.

Once you move a dinosaur, you can turn over a fern token, to see if the image

matches your dinosaur; if it does, you advance that dinosaur to Dinosaur Island.

But if it doesn't match, you just turn it back over and continue the game, in peace.

If you turn over a fern token to reveal a T-Rex, then everybody screams,

and all the dinosaurs return to start, in terror - turned to peace.

And here's the outcome of the game: everyone works together

for the welfare of the dinosaurs, who either land safely on Dinosaur Island

before the volcano blows;

or the volcano blows, game over, begin again...in peace.

"Now I don't know, I don't know. I don't know where I'm a gonna go, when the

volcano blows," Jimmy Buffett would say.

But if we play the game right, where I go, is where you also will go with me,

along with all of your dinosaurs. Sounds a little like Jesus, doesn't it?

In her book, *All About Love: New Visions*, womanist author bell hooks,
defines love as "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of
nurturing one's own and another's spiritual growth,
both an intention and an action," she says.

(hooks, bell. *All About Love*, p. 4-5)

Love is, as love does, hooks says. Love is an act of will, more than a song or a game.

Love is caring about where I go when the volcano blows,
but also caring about where you will go, and your dinosaurs as well.
And a little child will lead us, perhaps.

The prophet Isaiah paints God's word-picture like a diptych,
an artist's two-paneled hinged painting,
or like opposing pages of a picture book.

This particular word-picture comes to Judah amidst oracles of judgment
against God's people who have broken covenant,
and against the aggressive nations surrounding Judah, threatening harm,
destruction, disharmony, and the very future lives of their children.

Isaiah's scene on the left, is that of righteous young ruler, who will spring up
like a bright green twig from the all-but-dead family tree of Jesse.

And this ruler will be God's anointed/messiah, empowered by God's Spirit,
to use wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and fear of the Lord
to show favor to the weak and the poor, the vulnerable and marginal,

the littlest and lowliest, over and above the powerful and wicked.
Isaiah's scene on the right is that of God's new creation, pure and spotless,
where seeming adversaries live in perfect harmony: wolf, leopard, lion,
bear and snake; lamb, calf, cow, kid, yearling and innocent little children;
where none intend hurt or harm upon the other, because,
"the earth is full of the knowledge of God, as the waters cover the sea". (v. 9b)

Hebrew Scripture scholar Walter Brueggemann says, "here it is anticipated
that all creatures shall come to such knowledge...."

In wisdom traditions, the phrase clearly refers to an awed, discerning sense of
responsible, liberated, caring life in Yahweh's world.

In any case, the phrase is a promise and expectation that the hoping human person
may be, in the end, fully immersed in the wondrous mystery that is Yahweh
– the overcoming of every distance between Yahweh and Yahweh's
cared-for human creature."

(Brueggemann, Walter. *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 480)

Speaking of innocent children standing in the way of hurt and harm,
we had yet another frightening episode before Thanksgiving that
forced Jordan High School into lock-down mode
because of a threatening, profanity-laced message posted on social media.
It all turned out for the good, but what psychological harm is being done
to parents, families and to youth, when such events continue to occur?
Isn't this one place where the hoping human person longs for the overcoming

of every distance between God and God's cared-for human creatures
to bring to reality God's peace where none intend hurt or harm?

Isaiah uses two symbols to express God's hope for the future shalom of creation.

These symbols are visuals, like something we might see on our walk around
the neighborhood, and take a picture of with our i-phone,
which is a great spiritual practice, by the way!

These symbols, contradict our sense of hopelessness, like that which we might
feel after the Jordan High School episode, or that at any other school,
or when we read that violent crime and robbery has increased
significantly in Durham this year. Hopeless!

The prophet presents these imaginative symbols as gifts of God for the people of God,
to invite us to think the unthinkable and imagine a peaceful alternative
where everyone wins, where I am nurtured and so are you,
where all of creation is fully immersed in the wondrous mystery that is God.

The first symbol is the green twig sprouting from the dead-looking tree base,
new growth from an old growth system (like old FPC);
new life from near death (like Dewey Lawson);
second chance, from last chance; possible, from impossible .

The family tree of God is not finished yet; new leadership is springing up
to lead us and all of creation into the mystery that is God.

My hope is that you will continue to imagine that as I leave this place!

The second symbol is that of wild animals, abiding with domestic animals,

both alongside innocent little children, all creatures great and small:
a symbol of family that includes the whole earth community.

Notice that the stronger animals here abide in the habitat of the weak,
perhaps suggesting maximal security for the weak in their own territory,
in their own schools, perhaps.

(Fretheim, Terrance, *God and World in the Old Testament*, p. 197)

Now, I'm no biologist, but I think we are speaking here of symbiotic relationships
that mutually benefit all parties .

And again, take out your i-phones and snap pictures that you would consider
to be signs of God things coming to be:

the hummingbird and the wasp sipping pink sugar water together at the feeder;
or the crow watching out for the kitten. And a little child leading us.

Did I mention that once again First Presbyterian Church will be marching
in the Durham Holiday Parade next Saturday, December 14.

We've marched for the past two years as our own unit, tooting our own horn,
as the only local church in the city-wide parade.

But we don't need to do that any longer, because we have larger concerns
than our own identity and pride.

This year we are joining Laura McDow, a youth and young child of this church,
and the local chapter of March For Our Lives, which advocates
to end gun violence in our schools and communities
and work for peace for ourselves and for one another.

If this isn't a sign of God's peaceable kingdom, friends, I don't know what is.

Of course, in this season of Advent, we interpret that little child in Isaiah to be Jesus.

He is the one in whom we place and practice our hope.

We believe that he is the righteous ruler, the bright green twig

from the branch of Jesse, the inspired one, the anointed one, the Messiah,
who will lead his people with wisdom, understanding, counsel, might,
knowledge and fear of the Lord.

He is the one, like Isaiah's young ruler and Isaiah's little child,

who will invest himself in places of threat:

over the hole of the snake, near the den of the adder,
within King Herod's brutal empire and in eventual Egyptian exile,
beneath the stamping elephant and kicking donkey,
beside the wily fox and the pecking peacock,
near the rumbling volcano, ahead of the billowing hurricane,
among the Tar Heels and Blue Devils, beckoning us to follow him there
in order to stand and work for hope
in those yawning gaps between harm and harmony.

The road to peace is not always peaceful, friends, but it is where God's little child
will travel, and where she or he will beckon us to join them in the parade.

"Hope is what this community must do because it is God's community
invited to be in God's pilgrimage," says Walter Brueggemann.

"It is sealed...in the sacrament of baptism. It is dramatized in the Eucharist –
'until he come'. It is the structure of every creed that ends

by trusting God's promises." (Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 66)

And God has promised that God things come to those who wait,

to those who hope in the Lord until hope becomes reality,

to those who speak and practice peace, until the earth is full of the knowledge of God

as the waters cover the sea. Amen.

***Benediction**

And now, may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that

we may overflow with hope, by the power of the Holy Spirit (Romans 15: 4-13). Amen.