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Advent 2

December 8, 2013

“The Peace of God”

(Isaiah 11:6-9)

Rev. David K. Groth

“6 The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf 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 cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. 9 They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.” (Isaiah 11:6-9)

Collect of the Day

Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Every now and then a hunter or hiker in Wisconsin comes across a litter of wolf pups, or maybe just one that has been abandoned or somehow separated from the pack. And the guy gets the idea that it would be pretty cool to raise this wolf pup as if it were a dog. It never goes well. Sure enough, wolf pups are docile, playful, submissive, even cute . . . but then they start growing. Wolves need 10 to 15 square miles of open land for exercise. A fifteen foot tether in the back yard will not do. Wolves need meat, a lot of it, 2-5 lbs a day, along with the bones, skin and fur for nourishment. Two scoops of dog food will not suffice.

But the most problematic part of raising a wolf pup is in their innate behaviors. They are predators, and they cannot turn that off. And as they mature, wolves develop a strong incentive to rise to the top of the pack . . . to be the alpha. It will challenge you to be the top wolf. Wolves can never be fully trusted, especially around children. In fact, professional wolf biologists with just a common cold won't go near wolves because a wolf will pick up on any vulnerability and try to exploit it.

Wolves are smarter than dogs, but they can hardly be trained to do even the most basic commands such as sit, stay, or come. They live on their own terms. Therefore you never see a wolf in a circus performance, and there's no Wolf Retriever Club of America.

Yet people keep on trying. German wolf biologist Erik Zimen once attempted to form a dog sled team composed entirely of wolves. Can you imagine? He spent thousands of hours socializing wolf pups and getting them accustomed to the idea of a harness and the gear and the notion of pulling. For all his efforts, it did not go well. For example, no matter how hard he tried, "Gee" and "Haw" never meant anything to the wolves; they

always chose their own direction. And when a Robin once intruded on the resting team, a monumental brawl ensued. The fur flew, along with straps and harnesses and gear. Zimen and his wife ended up pulling the sled home themselves, and there's probably some justice in that.

Simply put, wolves are not dogs and cannot be dogs. They are, at heart, predators, and they cannot turn off their predatory instincts. Their behaviors are genetically encoded and cannot be trained out of them. Intense training and socialization might suppress some behaviors a bit, but it doesn't change a wolf's DNA.

So how is it then in our text we have all sorts of predators living peaceably with their prey? "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox." That's from the prophet Isaiah, who lived 700 years before the birth of Jesus, and Isaiah is saying when the Messiah comes, he will restore creation to its original state. He will bring peace, the peace of God, the kind of peace this earth hasn't seen since Adam's rebellion.

If you think about it, this prophecy of Isaiah looks a lot like the Garden of Eden before the fall into sin. Martin Luther imagined what Eden might have been like. "I am fully convinced" he writes, "that before Adam's sin his eyes were so sharp and clear that they surpassed those of the lynx and eagle. He was stronger than the lions and the bears . . . and he handled them the way we handle puppies. . . I believe Adam could command a lion with a single word, just as we give a command to a trained dog. And he was free to cultivate the soil to produce what he wished . . . thorns and thistles were not in existence at that time. Similarly, I also believe that in those days the beasts were not as fierce as they are now. . . I hold that before sin the sun was brighter, the water purer, the trees more fruitful, and the fields more fertile. But through sin and that awful fall not only our flesh is disfigured by the leprosy of sin, but everything we use in this life has become corrupt" (AE 1: 62-64), and there is no

true peace.

Before the fall into sin, people and animals seem all to have been vegetarians, herbivores. Listen to Genesis 1, “Then God said [to Adam and Eve], ‘I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and the creatures that move on the ground—everything that has the breath of life in it – I give every green plant for food. And it was so’” (29-30).

But then Adam and Eve decided they wanted to be like God, and in their fall, they took the whole creation with them. The innate behaviors of the creatures gets messed up. Some became predators; others prey. Listen to the contrast. In Genesis 9, God says to man, “Fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, upon every creature that moves along the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that lives and moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything” (Gen. 9:2-3). So, all the animals fall into their place on the food chain. And that which makes predators what they are cannot be trained or socialized out of them. They cannot turn it off.

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb. Surely that’s prophecy because that’s not at all like what we have now. Today if a wolf and a lamb were ever to lie down together my money is on the wolf being the only one to get back up again. Again, the behavior is genetically encoded; it cannot be trained out of them.

So it is with sin and rebellion. It seems almost as if it is in our DNA. We cannot turn it off. At best with a lot of training and socialization, we can suppress it a bit, but we cannot eliminate it. It is what we are. I not only commit sin. I am a sinner. Psalm 51, “I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me” (v. 5). It’s as if the stuff you and I are made of was spoiled by the Fall. Our DNA became disordered. We inherited the disease of sin from our ancestors and we’re passing it on to our children. And the result? There’s a stunning gap between how God created the world, and how the world really is, and that’s due to sin.

One of my professors liked to tell us as pastors we should always have an open Bible in one hand and a copy of the daily newspaper in the other. So let's give it a try:

"The wolf shall dwell with the lamb." *Jihadists make gains in Syrian Civil War.*

"The leopard shall lie down with the young goat." *North Korea Accuses Captive U.S. Veteran of War Crimes*

"The calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them." *Israel Condemns Nuc Agreement with Iran*

"The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together." *Japan and China Trade Sharp Words over Islands*

And you know, it's not just nations. We could do the same with the news from our own lives. That is, the headlines of our own individual lives will always speak of sin and conflict.

Some would reply, "Preacher, that's a rather dim view of humanity." Yes, it is. But it's also biblical and realistic. The history of the world and your personal history and mine would attest to this dim view of humanity.

If there is to be true peace, it's going to have to be given us from the outside. If the wolf is ever to make friends with the lamb, then God is going to have to fundamentally change the nature of the wolf and the world in which it lives. If the child is ever to play over the hole of the cobra, then we're first going to need a baby born in Bethlehem. If the leopard is ever to lie down with the young goat, then this Jesus will have to first die on a cross. If this earth is ever to be created anew, then Christ must first return. But God means for us to live in peace with one another and with the whole creation and he will not rest until we have that peace.

Take another look at the painting on your bulletin cover. It's by American artist Edward Hicks who became famous for painting 61 versions of this scene from Isaiah 11. Look at the background first where you will see Pilgrims making some sort of peace treaty with Native Americans. We know how that would go for the Indians. When man brokers a peace, someone usually gets the short end of the stick. But when God gives peace, it's a different story altogether. So now look at the animals, predators

and prey living together harmoniously. Notice the eyes of the predators, especially the spotted leopard near the bottom. Pop-eyed puzzlement comes to mind. Here he is, sitting right next to his favorite things to eat, but somehow he's lost his appetite. He feels no hunger, no compulsion to pounce. It seems someone has been tinkering with his DNA.

This is how it happened. "Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David." In our text, Isaiah had said it would happen this way. "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse." Jesse was David's father. The Messiah, then, would not only come from the house and lineage of David. He would be a new David, but unlike the first David, who was a warrior King and had a lot of blood on his hands, the second David would bring peace. And Jesus would achieve that also by having a lot of blood on his hands.

When he was crucified, Jesus suffered for the sins of the world. He paid the price for those messed up headlines in the newspaper, but also for those messed up thoughts, words and deeds in our own lives. He forgives you for them. He's not holding your sins against you. He has reconciled you with God and made peace for you with God. God's peace is not something we achieve, but something he gives.

It becomes intensely personal. Maybe you too recently retrieved from storage a small replication of the nativity. Setting it up, perhaps it reminded you how Joseph and Mary, when they arrived in the city of David, with the second David in her womb . . . how they had to stay overnight in a stable because there was no room in the inn. There she gave birth to Jesus and that birth had and has an impact on all creation. Even the stars acknowledge it. The sheep and cows and lambs are all there – around the edges. God with us, Immanuel, God with his whole creation because he loves his whole creation.

The Prince of Peace was born to make peace between God and man, and one day soon he will return to bring about the full manifestation of that peace in the New Creation.

No one really knows what that will look like, but I like to think Isaiah gave us a sneak peak of it in our text. The DNA will

be put right again. The wolf, looking rather surprised, shall dwell happily with the lamb, and the leopard shall frolic with the goat and the bear shall delight in the sweet taste of green grass.

May the peace of the Lord also be with you.

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