

The Dream

A sermon preached by

Dean L. Francis

First United Methodist Church of Evanston

December 4, 2016

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The 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. ³His 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; ⁴but 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. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The 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. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They 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.

¹⁰On 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.

The Dream Isaiah Saw that the choir will sing today has become my favorite Advent anthem. It is based on a 1994 poem written by Tom Troeger, a United Methodist pastor and professor at Yale Divinity School. The composer Glenn Rudolph began to set the poem to music in July of 2001 and he completed the composition 19 days after the 9/11 attacks. It was debuted later that year, in memory to those who had perished on September 11. It is for me proof that out of darkness, a new and blessed image can emerge. "Little Child whose bed is straw, take new lodgings in my heart. Bring the dream Isaiah saw: Life redeemed from fang and claw."

The 8th century before the common era was also a time of darkness and political crisis for the people of Israel. This time of despair provides the context for Isaiah's writings, prophecies, and the anthem this morning. Syria and the northern kingdom of Israel had invaded the southern kingdom of Judah (later Judea), seeking to force it to join their anti-Assyrian coalition. Ahaz (A Hazz) was king of Judah at that time, a man in his late twenties who was viewed negatively in other biblical accounts for his religious apostasy and his willingness to form an alliance with the

superpower Assyria.

So without overtly judging Ahaz or his predecessors, Isaiah offers an implicit criticism of their reigns in oracles about a glorious future king who would be even superior to the legendary David. Isaiah foretells that the dynasty that began with Jesse, David's father, will produce an ideal ruler who will be filled with the spirit of the LORD and the same qualities that we now identify as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, strength, knowledge, and fear of the LORD, which includes piety.

In short, this new ruler, this shoot from the stump Jesse, will fulfill the call of the coronation Psalm (72) that prays that the new king will “judge the people with righteousness and the poor with justice.” At last, calls Isaiah, such a king will come, though the people of Judah have not seen him yet. This new king will not rely on traditional ways of judgment, but will go far beyond his predecessors, bending over backward on behalf of the poor and the meek, making certain that justice is offered to them, despite those who would deny it to them. Plainly, Isaiah claims that kings too often have offered so-called justice to those who, like them, are rich and powerful. This new king will be different in every way.

And his strength will be displayed in a much different way, as well. This new king will not come with sword and shield but with words whose great strength and truth will be more than enough to tame and make ineffective any who would stand in his way, a way motivated entirely by “righteousness and faithfulness,” both of which will encircle him like a belt.

And with the coming of the new king, the creation itself will be transformed. The animals that are natural enemies—wolf and lamb, leopard and goat, calf and lion—will crouch down together in peace and contentment, all tended and led by a tiny child. Paintings of this scene are ubiquitous throughout the history of Christianity, the peaceable kingdom, as wild and domesticated creatures laze against one another while a child frolics among them. It is of course all too good to be true, and runs the deep risk of drowning in a dewy eyed misty gaze of romance.

How many of us have heard this vision and worshipped under its power, only to leave church and engage in the very practices that vision seeks to reverse? So, we need to resist such a romantic picture with all of our might, because that is far from Isaiah's intent. When God's new ruler comes, and surely that person will come, the universe will change. The first peace of creation, outlined in Genesis, will be restored, as both lion and ox will eat straw (where all beasts

are vegetarian!) and a nursing child will play with the deadly adder. Lovely portrait that this is, Isaiah does not want us to wash it in a candle-lighted glow. He wants to say that God's plan for the cosmos is precisely this: peace and harmony and beauty. Make no mistake! God is bringing this about again and again.

Where and when, we rightly ask? When the Tennessee wildfires take the homes of many who have no way to rebuild, when death in Iraq and Syria is a daily event, so common that we can hardly summon the emotion to care anymore, when so many of our citizens are poor and becoming ever poorer, how can anyone imagine in their wildest dreams that wolf will ever lie down with lamb? It seems nothing more than a cruel joke. Yet, so Isaiah, echoing the call of his God, proclaims.

This season we simply cannot give up the reality of this bold dream. It is this conviction, this certainty of God's desire for the cosmos that lures us onward into joining the journey toward that reality. This is the reason for Advent and Christmas and Lent and Easter, and the whole Christian story. God has a vision for the universe, and we are asked to join in. The new king is coming, and he will usher in a new cosmos. May we hope for it, work for it, pray for it, for without that dream we indeed will perish.