

Isaiah 11:1-10, NRSVUE

¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow^[a] 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 for the poor
and decide with equity for the oppressed 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 will feed^[b] 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.

Blessing in the Chaos

Jan Richardson, The Cure for Sorrow, 79

*To all that is chaotic
in you,
let there come silence.
Let there be
a calming
of the clamoring,
a stilling
of the voices that
have laid their claim
on you,
that have made their
home in you,
that go with you
even to the
holy places
but will not
let you rest,
will not let you
hear your life
with wholeness
or feel the grace
that fashioned you.
Let what distracts you
cease.
Let what divides you
cease.
Let there come an end
to what diminishes
and demeans,
and let depart
all that keeps you
in its cage.
Let there be
an opening
into the quiet
that lies beneath
the chaos,
where you find
the peace
you did not think
possible
and see what shimmers
within the storm.*

Sermon

I wonder...can you think about a time in your life that felt like just a stump? Where hope for the friendship, the relationship, the job or the dream was just cut down to ground? I mean, just think about the stump of a tree, especially when it was cut down and no one wanted it to be. It might be an overwhelming feeling of sadness. For many of us, it might bring to mind the last page of the Giving Tree, where the man sits on the stump...and it's just sad. It feels like life, love, hope is lost in that stump. It's a common image for a time when all seems cut down and hope or peace feel lost.

In a time when chaos was aplenty, when the powerful just sought more power and wealth and prestige while they disregarded the poor; in a time when wars and conquest seemed ever-present; when people's apathy led to lack of help for the hungry and the homeless; in a time when hypocrisy abounded—it was not the year 2022—it was 700-something BCE. Eons ago, amid that chaos, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words: *"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow and bear fruit out of his roots." The spirit of God shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might.*"

Isaiah gave his people, and us, a new vision, as scholar Walter Brueggemann says, a "new possibility for shalom."¹ When—not if—when unexpected new life rises from the stump of Jesse's line (that is David's line, which is many years later Jesus' line), Isaiah wants people to know—to be on alert—because the whole world order will change. And Isaiah gives us a fantastic image to convey this transformation, this thing that will happen in time, even though it seems like hope is lost.

Instead of the way things are in a dog-eat-dog, or at least predator-eat-prey world, instead, Isaiah paints this word picture: wolves the will live with lambs, the most vulnerable of sheep. Leopards will take afternoon naps with baby goats. Lions will eat, but instead of calves being on the menu, they'll be dinner partners. Children will play with snakes, but there won't be any venom, and snakes won't hurt or destroy. The predator and prey, whether they are human or other parts of creation, just won't operate that way anymore. "The old appetites of the food chain, the old assumptions of the survival of the meanest, all of that is subverted"² in Isaiah's vision. And a child shall lead them. A child.

It's funny, you know, because in thinking about "the peaceable kingdom" which is what this passage from Isaiah is often called, I have struggled. You see, its beautiful in art, depicted time and again to invigorate our imaginations with starkly contrasting animals. But I have struggled to find ways to bring this text to life—to make it real, not naïve or overly optimistic. It's important that Isaiah's vision is realized as a metaphor for a different reality that is *possible*.

"It's so sweet," I keep thinking, and every artist that has covered this passage has clearly been taken by this unbelievable vision that Isaiah presents. "It's so tender, nurturing, and loving." And, the skeptic in me says, "its so *impossible*." It *feels* impossible.

But to throw our hands up in the air and give up is to avoid our calling to take part in making peace, God's shalom in the world. Isaiah says the wolf will live with the lamb, and all

¹ Walter Brueggemann, sermon preached at Columbia Theological Seminary, 5 Dec. 2010.

² Ibid

predators and prey will give up that kind of relationship because they'll be transformed into something better, and a child will lead them. A child.

I think the Holy Spirit was winking at me this week in terms of that line from the scripture: "and a child shall lead them." The only stories I could think of for this sermon are from children's books and movies. "And a child shall lead them."

The first thing I thought after my skeptical "but it's impossible" moment, is the conversation from Lewis Carroll's book, *Through the Looking Glass*. The White Queen is talking with Alice (who we may know as Alice in Wonderland). Alice says, "'One can't believe impossible things.' And the White Queen replies, 'I daresay you haven't had much practice. When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'"

It's easy for children to operate, think, believe, hope in what seems impossible, I think, because they dwell in their imaginations, their wonderlands, so well. Magical thinking for children isn't silly, it's a world of possibilities. My youngest asked me this weekend how the trees in the distance look small: "how do they get little? When they're actually big when you get close up to them?" he wondered. We had a whole conversation about perspective, which I think didn't stick with him. He kept saying, "but Mom, they're small!" Which is maybe why Isaiah makes sure to mention a child leading this topsy-turvy vision of what could be. Or as singer Carrie Newcomer croons with a stubborn hope, "It's impossible. It's impossible, until it's not."

You see, it's easier for people to see the world in its inequity, division, hurt, betrayal, and hardship and chalk it up to "it is what it is," when actually, it is what we make it. Isaiah reminds us that God sees what we perceive as dead ends and longs for more, too. God is always on the move for so much more wholeness for creation. And deep down I think we long for that shalom, that wholeness, that peace, too.

Another children's example that I couldn't get out of my head is the animated movie "Madagascar." What I think is amazing in the movie is that it starts out in a peaceable kingdom of sorts: a New York City zoo. In the zoo, there are four friends—friends, not predator and prey—Marty the zebra (played by Chris Rock) is celebrating his anniversary at the zoo with his three best friends, a lion named Alex (played by Ben Stiller), a hippo named Gloria (played by Jada Pinkett Smith), and a giraffe named Melman (played by David Schwimmer). As Marty the zebra ends his party with his friends and gets ready for bed that night, Marty starts reflecting on his life in the zoo, and he wonders what life would've been like in the wild.

He doesn't have to wonder for long, because through a comedy of errors and the assistance of some clever penguins, Marty the zebra, Alex the lion, Gloria the hippo, and Melman the giraffe end up traveling to Madagascar where their predator prey instincts start to make themselves known. Alex the lion doesn't know why he starts salivating or keeps seeing steaks where Marty the zebra's rear end should be. Then he does know, and his instincts almost ruin everything. But in the end it's a movie about friendship, differences, and keeping their peaceful friendship despite, and through, challenges. What I love about this movie is that it is a children's movie that *assumes* the peaceable kingdom.

Why? Because it's not hard for children to understand. It's not a stretch of their imagination that a zebra, lion, hippo, and giraffe would be best friends. A child might even ask, "why wouldn't they be friends?" And we might laugh and say, "well that's just not how things

are.” But...a child will lead them. So maybe we could ask ourselves, “why shouldn’t it be that way?” Things are impossible, until they’re not. Consider scientific inventions that no one could’ve comprehended being actual realities just 200 years ago. The lightbulb, indoor plumbing, air travel, computer devices, space exploration, the speed at which a vaccine can be developed when scientists work together, those are just a few. What if no one had asked, “what if?” And why shouldn’t we ask “but what if” in regards to God’s peace in the world?

One of my favorite singer/writer/performers, Brandi Carlile sang on Austin City Limits not long ago. She was closing her show with one last song. She said, “we’ve never really done this one before live... I learned it for the month of June. I thought it could be my Pride song. Yeah, and then the world became a difficult place to live in together, and I thought, I don’t think Pride should end in June. I’m going to stretch Pride out for the rest of the year if that’s alright with you all.” That—that is believing the impossible—singing into the harshness of the world despite its hardships, and creating peace where there wasn’t any before. Brandi continued on and sang:

*“Stay gentle, keep the eyes of a child.
Don’t harden your heart or your hands.
Though to find joy in the darkness is wise
although they will think you don’t understand.
Don’t let the world make you callous, be ready to laugh.
No one’s forgotten about us, there is light on your path.
Stay gentle, keep the eyes of a child.
And wear, your heart on your sleeve.
Though to find joy in the darkness is wise,
although they will think you are naïve.
Don’t let them lower your shoulders,
love them more while they try.
Grow younger while you’re growing older,
be amazed by the sky...
Stay gentle, gentle
the most powerful thing you can do.
Oh, gentle, unbreakable you.”*

Now go back to that place in their life that just feels like a stump. Hopeless, and cut down. What would it look like for a shoot to grow out of that place? What would it look like to stay gentle to that possibility? Is it certain? No. Is it possible? Well, for thousands of years our ancestors have both held on to and passed down the hope, that yes. It is possible. For a shoot to grow out of a stump. For enemies to become friends. For hope and peace to grow in the least likely places. May it be so.