

“Christmas for Everyone: Inclusion”

Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 8, 2013

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We are in the season of Advent. We light our Advent wreath, and together we sing: “this year let the day arrive when Christmas comes for everyone – everyone alive.”

Everyone? Both wolf and lamb? Leopard and baby goat? Lion and calf? Both cow and bear? This picture is lovely when made into a painting and titled “the peaceable kingdom.” But if you’re the lamb being asked to get that close to that wolf, it might not sound so good. And even for the wolf, being asked to refrain from eating that lamb – maybe that doesn’t sound so good, either. We lambs really prefer to stick with other lambs. We wolves really prefer to run in our pack of wolves.

Where might you belong in this picture being painted for us by the words of the prophet Isaiah? Lamb or lion or leopard? Cow or kid or bear? And might you find yourself in a different place in this picture, at different times of life, or in different settings? Do you want to change the shape of the social community you find yourself in?

While we talk about these diverse creatures who seem not to belong together, let’s remember that here we are not talking about good and bad. There are no “good guys” and “bad guys” here. Only animals who have very different places in the natural order of things. If we make this a metaphor for human communities, the picture becomes more complicated. Sometimes people make choices that entrench roles and relationships in an unnatural order of things. People do things that are wrong. But remembering that lion and calf are simply who they are – neither bad nor good – might help us remember not to demonize humans, either – despite where those humans might find themselves in a less-natural social order.

I think that celebrating the life of Nelson Mandela, and remembering the history of how apartheid in South Africa was dismantled, might help us think about Isaiah’s vision for the day when “they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

It is not yet time for Christmas. We are in that Advent space that is not yet Christmas. We are in that Advent space that is a time for waiting, and wondering, and preparing. But even in this space of “not yet,” we have some sense of what we are waiting for. We know that this is the season of anticipating Christmas – Christmas as both the occasion of that baby’s birth long ago, and also the ways God breaks into our lives today. We have been here before, most of us – have seen this season of waiting and the celebration that follows. There are things we do know about Christmas.

To express the hope that Christmas comes for everyone does not mean we wish for toys and other presents and turkey dinners and ornaments for everyone. We are not hoping for Santa Claus to visit every home. These things are not Christmas, and they most especially are not the

answer to our Advent longing. These things are not what we mean when we sing our hope that Christmas will come for everyone.

When we sing our hope for Christmas to come for everyone, we mean our hope that God will arrive to touch everyone's life – because that is a part of what Christmas means. We mean our hope that God might be embodied or incarnate – a bit more tangible for us – because that is a part of what Christmas means. We mean that like Mary each of us might partner with God to bring forth new life – because that is a part of what Christmas means. We sing “let the day arrive when Christmas comes for everyone – everyone alive.” And our longing is that everyone might feel God's touch upon their lives, that everyone might sense God's presence more tangibly, that everyone might have the opportunity to partner with God to bring forth new life. Let Christmas come for everyone.

This year in our Advent worship we on the prophecies from Isaiah. Isaiah's prophecies speak about a future messiah who will come to God's people. Christians later came to interpret Isaiah's words as expressing a hope that is fulfilled through Jesus Christ. These readings from the Hebrew Scriptures, from the book of Isaiah, are beautiful and moving expressions of hope.

It is easy to make the image of lion and calf, or of wolf and lamb, into something sentimental. But I am inclined to think that the God our scripture describes – a God of righteousness who sees the plight of the poor and the meek – is not a sentimental God. And when we strip away the sentimentality of painted images of the peaceable kingdom, what is left can make us uneasy. Do we lambs want to lie down with wolves? Do we wolves want to lie down with lambs?

Let's set aside the sentimental or romantic images, and consider: what does it take for predators and prey to come together?

Again – predators cannot be labeled as “bad,” and prey are not somehow “good.” But Isaiah does suggest that we can bring together these conflicted creatures in a vision of a new natural order. And humans cannot be easily or accurately categorized as either predators or prey. For humans it is much more complicated. But human structures and institutions create and reinforce hierarchies that often separate people into “haves,” and “have-nots;” separate people into the powerful and the disempowered. What does it take for people to come together across these kinds of differences, in the face of these kinds of hierarchies and structures?

The truth is that our vulnerabilities are real. It makes good sense to want to protect ourselves.

And the truth is that our power and privilege are real. It makes sense that we would want to continue to enjoy those things.

Most of us find ourselves as sometimes lambs, and sometimes wolves, navigating the complexities of both those experiences. Do we lambs want to lie down with wolves? Do we wolves want to lie down with lambs? What does it take for animals with different places in the natural order to come together in ways we have not imagined?

The world mourned the death of Nelson Mandela this week. How can we help but see him as a rare hero, an inspiring figure, a rare role model of hope and dignity and wisdom, a laborer for justice?

Mandela seemed able to imagine a way to draw people together across differences etched by power and hierarchy. One of the remarkable things about him was that he did not give in to hatred, even after decades of oppression and imprisonment. He did not become hateful, despite the plight of black South Africans. Mandela did not seek revenge for the mistreatment, injustice, and suffering he experienced. He wrote: "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind I would still be in prison." He seemed able to imagine a different way.

Mandela also said, "If you want to make peace with your enemy, you have to work with your enemy. Then he becomes your partner." He famously invited one of his former prison guards to be present at his inauguration.

Perhaps when an enemy becomes a partner to work with – perhaps that is when the wolf can lie down with the lamb.

One of the remarkable things that came out of the dismantling of apartheid was the truth and reconciliation commissions. People have identified the imperfections of the commissions. But they still offer a glimpse of an alternative to how we normally see national and racial conflict or violence addressed. Perhaps confession and repentance are part of how the wolf learns to lie down with the lamb.

What does it take for the wolf to lie down with the lamb? I think structures must be changed – the structures that create the order in which wolves and lambs find themselves. I think the wolf has to give up some of its real power. I think the wolf has to decide to follow a different way. And I think the lamb needs to become empowered – to draw on courage, to take a risk.

An organization called "Men Can Stop Rape" ran a decade-long ad campaign that said: "my strength is not for hurting." The campaign envisions male strength in ways that go against a culture of sexism and sexual violence. The campaign offers an alternative vision of male strength.

Part of the vision God has for God's reign is that we do come together across our differences. Because Christmas isn't Christmas if it comes for the lambs but not the wolves. And Christmas isn't Christmas if it comes for the wolves and not the lambs.

This is not some pretty picture of people holding hands and singing "kumbaya." Not when there are wolves in the picture, not when there are lambs. The righteousness Isaiah speaks of can only come about as systems and structures are dismantled – as people learn different ways to be in the world. This is likely to be difficult and painful work.

But we are an Advent people, a people who believe and anticipate the coming of Christ as real in our lives. We are a people who invest our hearts and our souls and the labor of our hands in things that are not yet true. Like a vision of lions and lambs lying together. And by investing our hearts and our souls this way, by staking our faith on the claim that these visions are true, we

collaborate with God in revealing glimmers of this truth already in our midst. Not yet realized. But already here. God breaks into our lives today.

God's vision has not yet arrived – we know this. But perhaps the path charted by Nelson Mandela is just a bare glimpse of God's own vision. Perhaps a vision that embraces men's strength as entirely different from the power that comes from societal sexism is just a bare glimpse of God's hope for us.

In this season of Advent, we are watching and waiting. And as we watch, perhaps we will catch these glimpses of God's hopes just beginning to break into our own world. Perhaps we ourselves can find a part to play in working toward God's vision which is for everyone – both wolf and lamb.

In this season of waiting and hoping, this season of preparation and anticipation, this is our refrain: “this year let the day arrive when Christmas comes for everyone – everyone alive.” Amen.