

A New Zoo

I love animals and I don't particularly love zoos. I know that in a city with the oldest, and arguably one of the finest, zoos in the country, this could be considered an impolitic thing to say. But it's true. I remember years ago visiting a zoo, seeing a somewhat stringy lion let out an anemic roar, and what was going through my head must have come out of my mouth, because my friend Sherri quickly said to me, "That lion was born in captivity. He wouldn't last one week on the savannah. If he's going to live, this is where it's going to be. Besides, zoos aren't like they were in the old days, this is an educational institution."

Of course, she's right.

A few years later we were in Scotland, just north of Oban, on our way to Iona, and Sherri said to me, "There's a Sea Lion Sanctuary on the way, I'd really like to stop and see what they're doing."

Again, my anti-zoo sentiment reared its head. "Sherri, I don't really want to look at a bunch of poor sea lions swimming around in circles in some tepid puddle."

And again, I was justifiably corrected, "It's a rescue sanctuary," she said, "the injured pups are brought here and fed until they come up to weight and then they are released back into the wild. They've been tracking them for years and they have a ninety percent success rate. It's not a zoo. If anything, it's a new kind of zoo."

I thought about that this week as I reconsidered Isaiah's zoo because in each instance the *reality* was completely different from what I *saw*.

That is the heart of Isaiah's vision – nothing is as it seems. Nothing is the way we expect it to be.

Honestly, that's the magic of Isaiah's vision – that nothing is as we expect it to be.

Lions and lambs don't hang out together. Not for long, at least. Same with Leopards and kids – you *can* put them together but expect some nice gloves at the end of the day.

I've never seen a grazing bear.

Maybe you remember that wonderful Edward Hicks folk painting that hangs in the national gallery... it's called *The Peaceable Kingdom*, and it is Isaiah's vision come to life... there is a possum like-bear hanging out next to a cow gnawing on some straw, there is another cow next to a regal, restrained, elegantly serene lion, and in the midst of it all is a *toddler*.

We don't put toddlers in the middle of the zoo enclosures either, come to think of it.

The whole thing looks like a farce.

Isaiah's listeners would have thought it was pretty farcical too.

Most of us think of prophecy and assume that it is a prognostication – a look ahead to some sort of distant future. Many of us hear the words of Isaiah and think of Jesus.

Jesus is many hundreds of years into the future from when Isaiah was preaching.

Whatever we think that Isaiah has to say about Jesus, he starts with a word to his people about their situation right then. Isaiah was preaching a present word for a present reality.

Isaiah was written over many years through three distinctive and chaotic times in the life of God's people.

First comes a word of warning.

It is long and verbose but at its heart it is quite a simple warning to the people: *If you stay on this path, there will be consequences.*

The path in question is placing their trust, as a people, elsewhere from God.

Then Isaiah turns to a present reality: *The consequences have come; now we are living with them.*

Then finally, Isaiah gives a word of promise to the exiles: *God will return us to our homes. This suffering will not last forever.*

What I find so wonderful about Isaiah, though, is this: In every age of the prophecy, whether it is warning, or resignation, or even in the end looking to an eventual promise, there remains throughout Isaiah's prophecy the element of *hope*.

Our reading this morning, the absurd vision of the peaceable kingdom wherein logic is stood on its head with unpredictable animal behavior, is just such a word of hope.

It begins simply enough. A root shall come out of the stump of Jesse...

In the scenes before we read this, Isaiah warns of the utter deforestation of Israel. All that is living will be cut down, thrown as fuel into the fire.

If you stay on this path, there will be consequences, and they will be bad, is the warning of Isaiah.

But... even in seemingly *hopeless* circumstances, God promises *hope*, because God is God. So, even in the midst of rampant destruction and the promise of more destruction to come, there is a line that hearkens back to better days.

A root shall come out of the stump of Jesse.

We read that and our minds race *ahead* to Jesus, but those listeners of Isaiah's word would have raced back to *David*, back to the promise, back to another reality – that God is not done with them yet.

All that we see may present one reality – but God has a different vision sometimes. Perhaps God has a different vision *all* of the time.

I read this week of a recording that was made by Simon and Garfunkel in the 1960s.

It was an art piece, designed to make a point. They recorded the hymn *Silent Night* against the backdrop of the Vietnam War. Against the melodic strains of the song were heard the staccato punctuation of gunshots.¹

Their point was clear. The specter of war slashes at the salvific strains of the hymn. The reality of war and death negates the warm glow of candlelight around the carol, reducing it to a fairy-tale.

But, as I thought about it, I began to wonder if there is another way to hear it?

What if we reverse the way we listen to it?

What if the strains of the carol wash over the ugliness of gunshots, presenting instead a new vision - their vision of a coming world?

As I explored this idea, I began to wonder how our present world stacks up to this vision of the peaceable kingdom. So, I went to several newspapers, looked at the headlines, and I ignored the ones that reference the chaos of our national politics.

I started with the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where I saw a local representative is resigning from the legislature after embezzling a half a million dollars from her own charity.

Then I looked at the New York Times, and what jumped out to me was, *Climate Change is Accelerating; things are getting worse.*

So, I turned to the Wall Street Journal where I encountered the strife of ISIS: *He Rescued His Orphaned Children from Syria, Then He Lost Them Again.*

The Washington Post was no better, once I scrolled past all the impeachment coverage, what I was left with was Kim Jong Un.

That was Wednesday. It's enough to make us all feel like John the Baptist. Isaiah's peaceable kingdom seems all the more far away and unreachable.

I don't know about you, but I need a new zoo.

I need a different vision of reality.

I need the hymns and carols of the season to play over what we can *see* and present their stories of redemption.

The heart of the Gospel is the story of redemption.

And the whole Bible God's story of *hope*.

That's why hope springs through in Isaiah – because God has a *different* vision. God can see what can yet be.

Walter Brueggemann writes,

¹ Pulpit Digest, Nov-Dec 1990. P19

“The Old Testament voices the oldest, deepest, most resilient grounding of hope in all of human history...

YHWH has sworn to effect futures of well-being that are beyond the present condition of the world and that cannot, in any credible way, be extrapolated from the present.”²

That is the hope of the Gospel: That when it appears that things are just about as bad as they could possibly be – when things are as bad as a messiah strung up on a cross – that God is not done, that God is *never* done.

That is the Gospel promise: That hope never dries up. That God can, and God will, create a new reality, a vision as absurd as a peaceable kingdom.

You know, for most of us, when our life is going great, we don’t give too much thought to finding a hopeful future. But maybe for one or two – or three or four of us, life is hard this time of year, and loneliness creeps in. Maybe for a handful of us – or perhaps more than a handful - Christmas is just one more expense, one more looming pressure needing quickly to pass. Or maybe you are grieving. Holidays are hard when you’re mourning; I think perhaps the hardest of all.

The good news of the Gospel says, “Don’t give up, there’s a new zoo coming.

Don’t give up, because from the shreds of what *could* have been, God puts together a new creation, again and again, as long as it takes.

That is what redemption is: It is God taking what *is* and making it into what *can be*.

I love a story that Anne Lamott tells in her book, Stitches.

After her dog, Bodhi, shredded two different sets of curtains defending her against an unknown threat, either an assassin or the postman, she was left with two curtains that were perfectly fine in the upper portions, but ripped to pieces below where her dog leapt through them, ultimately wearing them like the tutu-wearing hippos of *Fantasia*.

She writes that she gave them to her friend to see what could be made from them. Two tops of curtains, no bottoms, and a seamstress. She writes,

“She wondered if the two tops could be mated, and ended up taking them home to see what she could do. This is all restoration requires most of the time, that *one* person not give up.”

After telling the story of her friend’s creative work, she concludes, “The newly sewn curtain was fabulous and crazy. Whereas before it had been logical and tranquil, now it was one wild lake of designs. Once it was two torn up curtains, and now it was a whole, although a whole with issues... beauty is a miracle of things going together imperfectly... what might have been thrown out went from tattered scraps to something majestic and goofy and honest that holds together, that keeps people’s eyes off of me and my family, yet lets in light and sun, like a poem or a song.”

² Brueggemann, Walter. Reverberations of Faith. (Westminster/JKP, Louisville, 2002) P100

She concludes, “You have to keep taking the next necessary stitch, and the next one, and the next. Without stitches, you just have rags.”³

That vision of the peaceable kingdom persists. If the appearance of John the Baptist in the wilderness preaching repentance says anything, it says that God is not yet done. There is an *expectation* of redemption.

Into all of the chaos of the world come whispers of hope and the constant expectation that we will take part in the wild kingdom that is coming but is not yet here... and how better may we contribute than to pick up the pieces that we have around us and start stitching the world back together, into the colorful and crazy new pattern that God is, even now, dreaming up.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.

³ Lamott, Anne. Stitches: A Handbook on Meaning, Hope and Repair. (Riverhead, NY 2013) Pp82-83.