

SCRIPTURE

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!

MESSAGE

The scene that Isaiah described in this morning's passage is often referred to as the peaceable kingdom. It is the kingdom in which a leopard will lie down with a kid – a goat – cows and bears will graze side by side as their young play together.

A nursing child – an infant – will play over the nest of poisonous vipers with no fear, toddlers will actually stick their hands into a snakes den. Not that these kids would normally be afraid of such a thing – it would be the parents having a fit. This raises an important point about fear being a learned response, not innate. Fear is something that the world teaches us, not necessarily something we are born with.

And this is kind of the point. Isaiah is describing a return to innocence in this passage; a return to the original conditions of Eden, where nobody will hurt or destroy another, and the earth shall be full with the knowledge of the Lord. The innocence is illustrated by children and animals playing amongst each other, with no concern, only trust and faith.

As adults we have a hard time taking some of this imagery seriously – the cow and bear both grazing in a field – the lion eating straw. The literalist within us wants to smugly point out that lion's teeth aren't designed to grind fibres, and their digestive systems can't draw the nutrients out of straw properly. Cows and other ruminants have four stomachs – the poor lion only has one.

I suspect this is exactly why Isaiah wrote that it is a child who will lead them. As adults we have too much knowledge and too little imagination to embrace the radical peace that Isaiah is describing. It's the same reason that adults can't enter Narnia, or Never Never Land.

But we will have to learn. Or perhaps unlearn. Jesus said that unless we receive his kingdom as a child we will never enter into it. Certainly there is an element of trust that we will require – a suspension of our disbelief. Perhaps a suspension of pride is more like it. It is impossible to enter into heaven with a critical spirit. We're going to have to set our judgement aside if we wish to see the Peaceable Kingdom.

But it's even more than this – it's not simply that with the wrong mindset we'll miss out on paradise. Isaiah has written this in two segments: the first reflects hope for a righteous ruler in the line of David, the shoot from the stump of Jesse; the second expresses hope for an age of harmony and peace, the peaceable kingdom. The thing to understand is that the first makes the second possible.

There will be no transformation of nature without first a transformation in human affairs. This makes sense if we turn back to the first book in the bible – Genesis.

Here we read about Eden, a land of peace and plenty; no lack, no want, no violence, no fear. But, human beings, being as we are, had to introduce deceit, and distrust which ultimately led to death.

The consequence is that we brought a curse upon ourselves, the animals, even the ground itself. Deuteronomy lays out for us how when we defile ourselves the land itself becomes defiled. The land stands in judgement of us – creation reflects our own disharmony.

As we grow more numerous and more powerful this truth is getting harder and harder to escape. Our desire for comfort, exploitive greed, and shortsightedness have resulted in starvation, disease, loss of habitat – a poisoned and polluted Eden.

Cain's blood cries out from the ground, our rapaciousness cannot be hidden or swept under the rug. And just as described in Deuteronomy, the overburdened land is preparing to vomit us out.

Now, this is not intended to be a sermon about environmental concerns, though I do hope that we all lighten the load that we are placing on our planet. The point that I'm making is that there is a direct correlation between human activity and the existence of the peaceable kingdom.

Isaiah described a new kind of ruler, a new political spirit, that would make possible the reign of peace that we all desire. We can't keep doing more of the same thing and wonder why our world is not the way we desire. The broken creation is the result of our broken relationships.

But the good news is that though humans disrupted Eden and defiled it, the salvation of humankind will also extend beyond us to encompass the whole of creation. We're the problem; we're also the solution.

That last sentence needs clarification. When I say that we are the solution, I don't simply mean that we can suddenly see the error of our ways and start making good decisions. We are in our current predicament, not so much as a result of some terribly evil men making terribly evil decisions; we are where we are because of millions of people making what seemed like good decisions.

Think of Eve in the garden. She saw the fruit, saw that it looked and smelled good, thought that it would be beneficial to have the knowledge of God, shared with her husband as a caring spouse would. She wasn't thinking about defying God.

Most evil is actually the pursuit of some good end through less good means. Few of us try to do evil, we try to do good but we take shortcuts along the way. That's because we are limited beings – we don't know all the variables – we think 'what can it hurt?' Turns out it hurts a lot.

The old expression goes 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions.' Proverbs tells us 'There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end leads to death.'

History as well as the bible tell us that even when we try to do good, we mess things up. So is that it? Do we give up? If we can't do right, should we then just do what is expedient or pleasurable?

The key for us is in the first few lines of today's reading. This new ruler, this new human being, will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord. This Spirit will give him wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and a delight in the fear of the Lord.

And now the key verse – He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

I think this is where we tend to stumble. Our present culture is very materialistic – and by that I don't just mean we like to constantly acquire more stuff – I mean that we think and explain things in largely material terms. We put our faith in what we can see and touch, what we can measure and stack up.

In many ways this serves us well, but we fall down because we don't know all the variables. The law of unintended consequences can be unforgiving.

I think we all have personal stories of trying to do good and as a result making things worse. The old children's song *There was an old lady who swallowed a fly* is a great example of trying to rectify a problem and at each stage making things worse.

We have issues because our knowledge is limited, no matter how good our intent. Our response is to gain more knowledge, and that is helpful, but will never be enough. Especially when we start making changes to our environment, there are simply far too many variables for us to account for them all. There will always be something that we overlook.

Perhaps instead of knowledge, we need wisdom – Isaiah wrote of wisdom and understanding being blessings of the Spirit of the Lord that anoints this new ruler.

Wisdom is qualitatively different than knowledge. Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit, not a vegetable. Wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad. To go a step further, philosophy is wondering if this means that ketchup counts as a smoothie.

Isaiah points out that wisdom does not come from the world – wisdom is not the automatic result of accumulated knowledge – there is something deeper at play.

This is why this new ruler of the house of David does not judge by what his eyes see, nor decide by what his ears hear. We see this theme elsewhere in the bible as well: Paul advises the Corinthian church members to walk by faith, not by sight.

'Not by might, not by power,' wrote the prophet Zechariah, 'but by the Spirit of God.'

Though we live in the world, if our reasoning and actions are only informed by the world we will continually find ourselves in error. Sometimes those errors are minor. Sometimes those errors have global impacts.

One final example of how what we see and hear can lead us astray, this one happened earlier this week in Exeter, north of London. I notice that over night the newspaper article was significantly redacted – shades of 1984 here – but the basic story is that a man was having a mental health crisis and had barricaded himself into his home armed with an axe. By the end of the day he had been shot and killed.

I'm not faulting the individual police officers involved – what they saw and heard was a man with an axe. Worldly wisdom tells us to counter violence with violence – so this man who was potentially violent became himself the victim of even greater violence. This is how our society operates.

Worldly wisdom counsels retaliation; when threatened we respond by escalating. The problem is that this serves to increase the amount of pain and suffering in the world. Our solution to suffering is to add to it, but pile it on somebody else instead of us.

We do this individually, and as a society. Our leaders are not significantly different than us.

But the Messiah instead counsels us to turn the other cheek. To not react to violence with more violence but instead to let the violence stop with us; to absorb it and thus remove it from the world. As we stop perpetuating violence and instead work to remove or ameliorate it, we begin to realize the peaceable kingdom here and now.

Jesus told his disciples that they were not merely servants, but friends. They were not invited to watch his mission, they were invited to share in it, to participate as active agents of the coming kingdom.

Nothing has changed. Christ's followers are still called to participate in the recreation of Eden, to be ambassadors and enablers of God's Kingdom, to be witnesses to the transforming love of Jesus.

As we respond to the Spirit's anointing and begin to act with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, and in the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord we will find that the peace, trust, and lack of fear that Isaiah illustrates in his vision of the peaceable kingdom is ours to disseminate – when we are empowered by the spirit we leave the kingdom in our wake.

May the spirit of God,
The spirit of wisdom and understanding,
Counsel and might,
The spirit of awe and wonder before the Lord
Rest upon you,
Empower you,
And embolden you
To speak love and peace
Where ever you go.
Amen.