

Life In The Zoo
Isaiah 11: 1-10; Romans 15: 1-7
Don Lincoln



Stump of Jesse used during
Scripture reading

Years ago, when Linda and I got married, she was living in Philadelphia with her 19 year old female cat named Keats. I lived in Annapolis along with my 3 year old male cat named Middie – short for “Midshipman.” Linda moved to Annapolis so we might put our households together.

The last thing to arrive in Annapolis was elderly Keats. Keats was the runt of her litter, and had always been a tiny cat. Middie, on the other hand, had been on the streets, fending for himself until I took him in. He was muscular, young and savvy, and had the claws to prove it. I learned that on numerous occasions.

We kept Keats in a separate room a couple days, and eventually decided it was time to introduce the two. Middie immediately went into macho mode, chased Keats under the bed, down the hall, over the top of the dining room table, and finally cornered her in the living room. He approached her, tail all puffed up, and ears flat on his head.

The moment he got in range, Keats took one step forward, and proceeded to pummel him with left jabs, right hooks, and lightning fast uppercuts. She looked like Muhammed Ali at his peak.

Middie never got over the shock. He maintained rule of one bedroom – there were other people in the room to protect him - but the rest of the house belonged to Keats. They avoided each other with all intentionality, but whenever they came around opposite sides of a corner and surprised each other, Keats reminded him of that first meeting.

Such was the thought that came to mind when I read this passage from Isaiah – where predator and prey are all pictured in this idyllic scene, lying peaceably together. As Woody Allen once said, “Well.....the wolf may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb isn’t going to get much sleep.”

Isaiah is picturing a scene of hope for the people of Israel – pummeled and pounced on by the devouring nations of Assyria, Manasseh, and whoever else wanted to beat up on the current runt of the Middle East. Isaiah pictures Israel's future hope – a social order of tranquility where justice rules at the hands of a descendant of David, where nature is reconciled, and where the ancient enmity between human and beast is gone.

It's a marvelous picture that Isaiah give us, and you don't have to live in ancient Israel to be someone who longs for its reality – for a time when warring nations will cease devouring each other; when world leaders would exhibit a spirit of wisdom and understanding – leaders who will not judge by what is on the surface, but will decide for the rich AND the poor, the powerful and the weak, with the appropriate righteousness, liberty and justice for all.

How we long for that world. **And that's part of our problem.** Longing. We dream about it. We hope against hope, we wish upon a star, and we imagine. "Imagine no possessions..."¹

A friend did a children's sermon on this passage, talking about the images. "The story speaks of a wolf living with a lamb, a leopard lying down with a goat, and calf and lion together," she said. How could that be possible?" One little girl responded, "Maybe they're all vegans."²

Imagine all the people.... And we do.....and then we go back to our real world, avoiding those with whom we differ like cats in a big home; staking out our turf, with occasional episodes of flying fur when we cross into one another's territory.

That's why I've never been a fan of live nativity scenes at Christmas. Here in the Northern Hemisphere, it's too cold to expect a live baby to last long in a fake manger; and despite their wings, after a couple hours, the angels are rarely angelic; Mary and Joseph get a little testy, the Kings are wishing they'd brought scotch instead of myrrh, and well, if you've ever been in one, cows, sheep and donkeys often don't appreciate one another's company. They don't like each other.

We preach in this season that the coming manger scene was the moment when the love of heaven pierced this broken earth, but most churches who do those live nativities realize that zoos put the animals in separate cages for a reason.

Which is why I also read today's lectionary text from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul is writing to a church where members are like wolves and lambs; leopards and sheep. One group preying on another – that's preying with an "e", not praying with an "a".

"We who are strong ought to put up with the failing of the weak. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up **the neighbor**. (Mr. Rogers, anyone?). May the God of encouragement grant you to live in harmony, so that with one voice you will glorify God. Welcome one another, just as Christ has welcomed you," Paul says. (Romans 15).

Of course, Paul couldn't be speaking to us. There are no wolves in the church; no leopards eyeing the little calf in the next pew over, right?

I remember some time back, a visitor to Westminster called me to ask some questions, because the pastor of her current church – a theologically more conservative church – was concerned that she was now visiting Westminster. He was concerned for her faith. “Don't go there. They'll corrupt you,” he told her.

We shake our heads – or we laugh – at such absurdity. But what is our next tendency? To diss right back. I recall thinking to myself, “Of course her pastor was a **HE!** Guarantee there are no woman in leadership in that church! What a loser.”

Isn't that our style? We show our claws, we bare our teeth, and we return the favor. We do it all the time. “Well..... we're REALLY doing church here. Our people are really following Jesus.”

“Put up with the failings of the weak,” Paul says. Even if we think they're misguided. I found myself having to work really hard to be able to say to that visitor, “I'm sure your pastor is only trying to do his best in looking out for your Christian walk.”

It is clear Paul is instructing us – every church in every age. Those who are mature in faith are to be understanding and patient with the less mature. In other words, you and I cannot look with disdain on those who are still journeying faith paths that we have already crossed. I hear people saying, “Oh the Methodists, gosh they are just at each other. Isn't it awful.” I say, It's just been a few years since we were having the same argument as Presbyterians. How often do we talk about the witness of the church and forget that the VERY life of and within the church **IS** the very heart of our witness.

As a friend of mine said long ago, “Don, when you Christians actually start loving each other, let me know – I might give you a listen. I might believe there is a love of Jesus then.”

It's hard work. And much of the time, it appears we'd be better off in separate cages. But it is our calling, and if we don't model it here, in this faith community, and then from church to church, denomination to denomination and even across faith community lines to interfaith communities, will the world think we're worth paying attention to? Could we just call someone who thinks differently than us a worthy opponent, as opposed to calling them the enemy? Something about civility?



The picture – entitled the “Peaceable Kingdom” – is a nineteenth century painting by a Quaker named Edward Hicks. It is an illustration of this text from Isaiah, with the wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, and the little child leading them. In the background, Hicks added an image of peace from America’s recent history – William Penn making a treaty with local Indians.

What you may not know is Hicks painted more than 60 versions of this scene. Each one is different. Some of the pictures, like this one, are quite peaceable. In others, the animals look like Middie and Keats – as if they’re about to rip each other to shreds – the carnivores looking at herbivores with the possibility of them being the next lunch entrée.

Art historians tell us this is no accident. At the time Hicks was painting, the Quaker movement in America was in turmoil. Some Quakers – led by a cousin of Hicks – wanted to cling to a very simple life, but others wanted to compromise, and engage more with the rest of society.

The movement was beginning to fracture. There was bitter wrangling, and Edward Hicks hated the discord. We all know, there’s nothing quite like church folk when they start fighting amongst themselves. Hicks’ paintings mirror the ups and downs of the debate.

Hicks painted a kingdom in which the peace was sometimes very fragile. It was this scene which he put in front of his quarrelling brothers and sisters in Christ. However they felt about each other, this was the way it was meant to be. The wolf **WAS** going to lie down with the lamb. That was what God had promised, and Hicks trusted one day it would be the reality.³

The challenge is in every generation that you and I are the only ones God has to make it a reality in the current world, in Christian community, and in our influence in the wider community in which we minister.

At the last meeting of my pastors’ group, one colleague told of the time he was pastor of a small church in Kentucky. In the town they had a gathering of local ministers – Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Southern Baptist. They agreed that each of their congregations would sponsor a refugee family. Wouldn’t you know it, my colleague said, the Southern Baptists got a Buddhist family from Cambodia.

My colleagues and I chuckled. And he continued, “You know it was pretty interesting for the rest of us in the group to watch the Southern Baptists learn that Buddhists were human.” And we all chuckled a little more....

And then he said to us, “What was even more interesting, was to watch the rest of us learn that the Southern Baptists are human too.....”

You see our real human problem is this – you and I want a system that is so perfect that **we do not need to be good**. We say we want the peaceable kingdom, but want it handed to us on a platter by someone else. It's hard work. And it's OUR work.

In this day and age when so many of our elected representatives cannot seem to do anything but bare their teeth, show their claws and hiss at one another, the world needs to see something different. The world is in need of generous and unselfish souls. We – the people who follow the shoot of the stump of Jesse – the One whose ways of love are truly different – you and I know when somebody says, Love your enemy and pray for them - we should be the primary source of the unselfish souls the world needs.

And every time you and I model the life and love of Jesus, we show again how to welcome the One who we claim is coming.

May it be so. Come Lord Jesus. AMEN.

1. Lyrics from John Lennon's "Imagine"
2. Quoted by Anne Le Bas, Midrash, www.joinhands.com
3. Anne Le Bas; Midrash at www.joinhands.com