

the very hearts of those who are paralyzed by fear, anger, or worry. The shoot *shall* come forth. Peace *shall* reign. The earth *will* be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Isaiah’s vision is not an ‘if,’ it’s a ‘when.’ So when we pray, “thy kingdom come,” let it be this peaceable kingdom we await, and let it come quickly, Lord.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

December 4, 2022

Second Sunday of Advent

“The Kitten Will Lie Down with the Pig?”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10

James Herriot was a British veterinarian who also became a prolific writer about his experiences with animals large and small in the Yorkshire countryside. You may be familiar with his stories adapted for movies and TV, most recently the Masterpiece Theater program, *All Creatures Great and Small*. We have a book of Herriot’s stories on our shelf at home and one of my favorites is called “Moses the Kitten.” In the story, Herriot discovered a tiny black kitten, nearly frozen to death by a pond. He took the kitten to the nearby farmer’s house, where the wife warmed him in her woodstove, fed him spoonfuls of milk, and named him Moses because he was found by the rushes near the pond just like baby Moses in the book of Exodus. When Herriot returned to the farm some weeks later, he looked around for Moses and saw lots of other cats—calico, white, tabby, but he couldn’t find the black cat anywhere. Finally, the farmer called Herriot to a pen in the barn.

Herriot writes, “I leaned over the wall and my face must have shown my astonishment because the farmer burst into a shout of laughter.

“That’s summat new for you, isn’t it?”

I stared unbelieving down at a large sow stretched comfortably on her side, suckling a littler of about twelve piglets and right in the middle of the long pink row—furry black and incongruous—was Moses. He had a teat in his mouth and was absorbing his nourishment with the same rapt enjoyment as his smooth-skinned fellows on either side.

‘What the devil...?’ I gasped.”¹

The farmer said it was his wife’s idea to put the kitten in with the pigs. Bertha the sow had just had a litter of piglets, so the heater was on in her pen and it was a “grand and cozy” spot. The vet wondered whether the cat was living on the sow’s milk or whether he was still drinking from his bowl. The farmer felt sure it was a bit of both. And Herriot concluded, “whatever mixture Moses was getting he grew rapidly into a sleek, handsome animal

1 James Herriot, “Moses the Kitten,” *James Herriot Treasury for Children*, (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2014). Story originally published 1974, renewed 1984.
2 Leanne Van Dyk, “Commentary 1: Connecting the Reading with Scripture, Second Sunday of Advent, Isaiah 11:1-19,” *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2019.) 18.
3 “Peaceable Kingdom ca. 1830-1832,” *The Met*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/11081>

with an unusually high gloss to his coat which may or may not have been due to the porcine element of his diet.”

Pigs and cats are not natural enemies, like the pairs described in Isaiah’s text. But surely, they are odd bedfellows. A picture of them lying together, of one being nursed into life even, by the other, is a picture of peace and harmony that startles us a bit. It is wonderful and beautiful, even as it doesn’t quite make sense. Herriot and the farmer shared laughter and disbelief about what they saw. When the animals in Isaiah’s prophecy live together, even enjoying one another’s company, it means something has changed, something in the world is different. Knowledge of the Lord and of God’s ways has permeated Creation itself.

Isaiah says that happens when a new ruler comes on the scene. The ruler comes from a tenuous background. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,” or as a newer translation says, “from the *stock* of Jesse.” The word *stock* helps us understand that it means Jesse’s family line; but the word *stump* is a better visual. Stumps are dead. They mark a spot where life *used* to be; not where life is anymore. So if a tender, green shoot comes out from the stump, it is not a picture of strength and power, but a picture of vulnerability. The kind of leader God is sending is like that little sprout. Not like a mighty oak or a redwood or a tall evergreen. But like a tiny new growth that springs up in a place left for dead. As Leanne Van Dyk says, the shoot “demonstrates how much God can do with so little.”²

And by the animating power of God’s Spirit, a lot can be done, indeed. The Spirit gives this leader wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear, or better said, reverence, of the Lord. Early Christian theologians identified those six specific gifts as ones given to Jesus, adding *godliness* for good measure. Even today, we pray for those six gifts Isaiah names while a person is still dripping wet from the baptismal waters. The leader Isaiah speaks of uses those gifts to change the world, finally bringing peace with justice into it.

Isaiah did not have Jesus in mind when he wrote down these words, but rather an earthly ruler that God would send. Later, Jewish readers also began to hear the promise of a messiah in this passage. Christians, with the knowledge of Jesus’ birth and ministry, saw his witness clearly reflected in this text. For us, Jesus is the ruler who emerged from a humble background, born to two poor teenagers, far away from home without even a roof over their heads. He was given the gifts of the Spirit to animate and empower his ministry. He saw the world beyond what his eyes and ears told him, and he always looked with love on the meek. Though peace did not always surround Jesus in his lifetime, we find peace in his presence.

And our hearts trust that when he returns, he will bring about a peace so full and so unifying that the wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, and the calf and the lion and the child really will travel about together.

There’s something refreshing about a vision of peace that is focused not on people, not on nations, but on animals. The leader first brings justice to the land. And then all of creation, starting with the animals, are able to live in peace. Edward Hicks was an American Quaker minister and painter in the early nineteenth century. He is best known for painting this particular scene of animals from Isaiah, what he called the Peaceable Kingdom. Hicks didn’t paint one single masterpiece of the vision though. He painted perhaps a hundred versions of it; sixty-two of which survive today. Hearing that, begs the question of why he painted this scene so many times. In the Quaker Society of Friends, painting was controversial and sometimes deemed out of line with the values of plainness and simplicity. Perhaps Hicks found that focusing so much energy on this particular scene was a way to navigate that difficult path.³ Or perhaps he wanted to put as many versions of peace into the world as possible? I hope that is the truth. That he wanted to live into that peace so badly, that he couldn’t stop painting it. That this scene of Christ’s peace, had a pull on him that simply wouldn’t let go.

The scene Hicks painted both surprises and comforts us; we are drawn to it and not sure what to make of it. We stand in awe of the peace and harmony; yet we remain skeptical and uncertain whether it will ever really come to pass. Maybe because we are so accustomed to the world as we know it—the discord, the strife, the violence—that we can hardly imagine it any other way. So we need the vision of Isaiah to open our imaginations to what is possible when the Messiah comes. We need the vision of writers like Herriot and artists like Hicks who put images into our minds to help us understand the strange, new world Christ is bringing forth. For when we are able to imagine a peace like Isaiah’s, we can begin to believe it as a real possibility. We begin to trust that new life can emerge from a long-dead stump, that resurrection can emerge from a darkened tomb, that a child born out of wedlock far from home could be God with us.

When we are able to imagine it, then we are able to notice signs of that peace already unfolding. We are able to lean into that peace and work toward it. And other times, we are able to get out of the way and let Christ go about the work of building his reign. He is the Spirit-filled leader who is bringing peace among lions and oxen, just as he is bringing peace among sworn-enemies, bullied children, estranged family members and into