

Creating Space for Peace
Isaiah 11:1-10
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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There are a few pictures I want you to see. (show slides of unlikely animals pairings through this first paragraph) Look at these unlikely relationships. Picture after picture of this kind of cuteness can be found on the internet...or maybe if you are lucky, in your own backyard.

And something draws us to these. In fact, if you are reading the Advent devotions from the book we made here at First Christian this year, later this week you will read what Dennis Arnold wrote as he reflected on our sheer inability to turn away when one of these sweet pictures pops up on our computer screen.

What is it that so appeals to us about a dog and duck, or a pig and a rabbit, or a tiger and a cow becoming friends?

Maybe it's the same thing that is tapped in us when we hear stories like the story of Wanda Dench, the white grandmother who four years ago accidentally texted the wrong person and ended up inviting Jamal Hinton, an African American young man, to Thanksgiving. If you saw that story then you also saw that 2019 was the 4th Thanksgiving they've spent together as that accident led to a relationship.¹

Maybe it's the same thing that is tapped in us when we read stories or saw at our own Pridefest here in Iowa City as women and men in their 50's, 60's, and older wore t-shirts that read, "Free hugs" and hugged everyone who wanted one, especially those LGBTQ youth who had been rejected by their families and those drag queens dressed to the nines.

¹ <https://abc13.com/society/grandma-who-texted-wrong-teen-shares-4th-thanksgiving-with-him/5722279/>

And maybe the appeal is heightened in a world where most of our headlines are filled with conflict, where most news stories are of the “us vs. them” variety.

And we aren’t the first ones longing for peace.

In reading the book of Isaiah we are reminded of that. While the prophet Isaiah was speaking to King Ahaz and those around him, while he was telling difficult truths about their lack of faithfulness and the consequences that were just around the corner, still he shared glimpses of hope, words that reminded them that the story could *and was intended to* turn out differently. And, for Isaiah, this hope may have been in Hezekiah, the one who would be king after Ahaz, one of only two kings in the divided kingdom to escape condemnation by the biblical writers. It is likely that Isaiah, knowing that Ahaz was not faithful, had looked to the next in line and seen the possibility.²

But, of course, by the time of Jesus, these words had not yet come to fruition, maybe here and there in moments and encounters, but certainly not in a complete and final way. And so, it is no wonder that the people around Jesus looked at him, watched him, listened to him, encountered him and saw in him one who might bring about this kind of peace...saw in him one they called Prince of Peace.

So, we hear these words during Advent. We hear these words during this season when we are preparing to remember Jesus’ birth, but also preparing our hearts and lives to receive the presence of God-with-us again and again.

We hear Isaiah’s words as he says, “The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; the lion shall

² Bruce C. Birch, “Exegetical Perspective on Isaiah 11:1-10” in *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 27.

eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain..."³

We need to hear these words because still they are not fully experienced.

Still we know too many stories of people and nations tearing each other, literally or figuratively, limb from limb.

Still we know what it is for those who are different from one another to see an enemy before they even take a moment to imagine a friend.

Still we know what it is to assume that we know what someone thinks or believes or does because we know one or two demographic details about them.

And the reality is that we know both what it is to be the predator and also what it is to be the prey. See, that's the thing about these pairings that are named in these verses from Isaiah – they are pairings of animals, or animals and humans, whose interaction with one another is one of fear, one where there is an imbalance of power, one where we might say that the natural order of things – even the food chain – has one eating or harming the other.

And even though we live in a time and place where we are pretty protected from the threats of wild animals, each of us has had experiences where we were powerless, where we were afraid, where we were the victim of a person or a system who held the power.

And, if we are honest, each of us also has had experiences where we did hold the power, where we used or abused others – sometimes without knowing or without acknowledging it – for our own gain, where we weren't held accountable for the destruction we caused.

And so, we need these words from Isaiah.

³ Isaiah 11:6-9a, NRSV.

We need these words because Isaiah wasn't only talking about animals getting along. Rather Isaiah was talking about a correction, about the original intention of all creation coming back into view. Isaiah was talking about power shifting so that not only equality, but equity was a reality. Isaiah was talking about opposites being brought together and finding places of connection where defenses go down and unity increases. Isaiah was talking about a world that is upside down from the expectations and experiences of this world, but that is exactly the world God intends.

And so, on this second Sunday in Advent, we gather together and we ask how we can create space for peace. Because, friends, it seems clear that God wants our participation in the righting of the world. God wants us to be active partners in bringing all of creation, all relationships back into the balance that God intended. God wants us to shift our relationships from being conflicted to being symbiotic, being those where there is mutual benefit for all involved.

So, how do we create space for peace? Where can we create space for peace? Nobody in this room has the power to end wars or to change most of the headlines. But we have amazing power in our spheres of influence...we have endless opportunities to pause before we react, to give the benefit of the doubt, to ask how we can change the mood of relationships which often involves changing our own attitudes, to be bearers of peace. Each of us has amazing power, as that old Ina Ogdon hymn suggests, to "brighten the corner where you are."⁴

So, let us create space...space where we might choose peace...space where we might nurture peace...space where we might see God's intended peace become real again in all creation. May it be so.

⁴ Ina D. Ogdon, 1913, words in Public Domain.