

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida  
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Isaiah 11:1-10 (NRSV)

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

[2] The 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.

[3] His 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;

[4] but 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.

[5] Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

[6] The 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.

[7] The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

[8] The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

[9] They 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.

[10] On 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.

## RUSSIAN REALITY

After the fall of communism there was a time of confusion and economic chaos in the former Soviet Union. The Russians on the street said that there were two solutions to their great difficulty. One solution was realistic and the other utter fantasy.

One solution would be for the independent Russian republics to work out an agreeable form of cooperation and to develop healthy economies. That solution is utter fantasy.

The realistic solution is for aliens from outer space to arrive and straighten everything out for them.

Pessimism is still pervasive in Russia, but it is also pervasive in our country as well. People want realistic solutions to real problems. They don't want pie in the sky by and by.

They don't want some fool nonsense about wolves and lambs lying down together. They want something practical. The Russian "solution" to their economic problems is comical, but is it any different from the solution that we are offering from the Bible in our lesson today?

The chances of aliens coming down and fixing the economy are mighty slim. But, isn't it also a stretch to think that lions and lambs will lie down together (or for that matter Israelis and Palestinians). Why, even if God himself came to earth that might not happen.

## NOT HAPPY WITH JESUS

I was in a heated church meeting once and someone said, "Even if Jesus Christ would come to this church, there would be some people who would be unhappy."

You've heard statements like that before. Even if Jesus himself would come to the Middle East, there would be still be conflict. Even Jesus would be crucified by those people.

Oh wait. That really happened didn't it? At the center of our faith is the harshest reality of all, the reality of the cross. God did come into the world to bring peace on earth and good will toward men and women. And what did it get Him? It got Him crucified.

So what hope do we have? Why should we read these poetic passages about a lion turning into a vegetarian or a four year old boy being able to play with the cobra at the Serpentarium at St. Cloud?

### AN UNREALISTIC VISION

That's unrealistic and even irresponsible preaching. Even the guy who runs that place has almost died from snake bites on numerous occasions. What chance would child have against a spitting cobra or the deadly adder? They would have no chance. The snake would win.

And yet, despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite the fact that people die from snakebites, despite the fact that domestic animals are once again under attack from the wolves out West and good people everywhere are being crucified all over the world, we insist on preaching this unrealistic message every year. We insist on dragging out this vision of the peaceable kingdom each year at Advent.

Can you think of anything so unrealistic and idealistic to say in a world like ours? Someone put it well this past week. She said, "We might follow Jesus and turn the other cheek, but we better not turn our backs." She had a point. The world we live in is filled with wolves and snakes and bears and poisonous snakes. And those dangerous animals are going to act according to their nature. And the human animal is going to act according to his nature as well. Jesus told his disciples that they had to be realistic about the future. If they crucified him, guess what would be in store for those who had the gall to follow him?

### PEACE ON EARTH?

It feels good to sing the song each year and invite you to sing along. "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me." But, I'm afraid that when it

comes to peace on earth our influence is rather limited. In fact sometimes getting even a little peace of mind seems like a pipe dream.

Some would say that we need to “get real” when it comes to peace. Instead of waiting for aliens from outer space to come fix our problems or even more fantastic for God to come down to earth and fix our problems, maybe we just need to do something. After all, God helps those who help themselves. Right?

I read a sermon on this passage by a Rabbi who made this very point. She said that she wished Christians would quit singing the Advent hymn, “O Come O Come Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel.” She said that Israel had learned not to wait on God’s rescue. They were responsible for their own salvation.

Given the horrors of the Holocaust, you can’t blame them for taking that approach. This passage might be saying just the opposite, and maybe “when the kingdom comes” the wolf and the lamb will get along, but right now if the wolf and the lamb get together we’re talking lamb chops!

I’ve watched the Animal Planet enough on TV to know that certain species don’t get along. They’re natural enemies. And I’ve watched enough CNN to know that certain people don’t get along either. They’re natural enemies.

## CREATING OUR OWN REALITY

So what’s the practical solution? A political advisor advocating war said that the world does not work the way that it used to. (I guess we could all agree with that one.) So what’s his answer to this broken world? He suggested that we need to make up some new rules. Speaking of our country, this modern prophet said, “We are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.”

In other words, don’t live by some unrealistic vision about a wolf and a lamb lying down together. Don’t live by an archaic notion of absolute right and wrong. Make up your own rules. Create your own reality.

I don't know about you, but that kind of thinking sends chills down my spine. If we think that we have the ability to create our own reality, what kind of reality are we going to create, and who gets to decide?

Actually, this is nothing new. Some of us remember reading about the Pax Romana in school, that peace enforced by the Roman Empire. Long ago they created their own reality. In case the book was too long for you to read, let me summarize it for you. In the long run it didn't work out so well. The empire fell.

And I would suggest that every attempt to create our own reality since then has not worked out so well. When we try to create our own reality, when we try to make our own peace, we mess things up even more. We sometimes even become like the evil that we are trying to fight.

## UNREAL REALITY

Have you seen any of those so-called reality shows on TV? They're popular and cheap to produce. But, what intrigues me is the idea that these shows portray reality. If that's reality then I'll take fantasy every time! I don't believe that these shows are remotely connected with anything approaching reality. It might be reality for those guys in "la-la land" but it's not what I think is real and true.

So what are we to do? Where can we find what is real and true? We can't count on our government or the media to help us when it comes to reality. Their version of "reality" is more distorted than even the most fanciful dream.

I'm a strict Calvinist when it comes to the state of the world. The word we use is "total depravity." We might not be as bad as we could be, but even the best of us are totally blinded by our selfishness and sin.

Self-help is not an option. We are without hope unless something or someone can reach down and save us.

## GOD'S REALITY

I would suggest that even though we sometimes can't see it and though we often have a hard time believing it, reality is not what we can see and do. Reality is what God has revealed and promised.

Do you want reality? I would direct your attention to a dark pasture in ancient Bethlehem. Not aliens but angels filled the sky with the light of God's glory. The angels told the shepherds not to be afraid, but they were scared out of their wits. No one had ever seen anything like this before.

And then these angels brought the shepherds a message that sounded a whole lot like our message from Isaiah. In Isaiah we read about this branch from the shoot of Jesse, this Messiah who would be filled with God's Spirit and who would bring salvation to a broken world.

The world was in a real mess in those days. Foreign powers had destroyed much of the Promised Land, and it looked like the Holy City Jerusalem would also be destroyed. The whole country was like the stump of a once proud tree that had been cut down in its prime. Isaiah said that God was going to intervene in that broken world and create something entirely new.

Well, each year we say that this prophecy came true. God did indeed send a Messiah. God decided to intervene in the world. "Unto you a child is born." In this world of destruction and pain, salvation comes in the form of a baby, God in the flesh.

Aliens landing from another world would have been an easier story to believe. God landing in ancient Bethlehem was utterly fantastic. And yet that's the vision we proclaim each year. Many of us grew up in the church and the story is familiar to us. Maybe the story is too familiar. We don't openly disbelieve the story, but we don't stake our life on it either. We just smile as the kids re-enact the story with a sense of innocence and awe. And then we go on our merry way the rest of the year.

I've got a suggestion for you. Suppose that stuff you see on CNN is just a fantasy, the result of delusional people who think that they're really in charge when they're not. Maybe they're not all that different from some ancient rulers named Herod and Caesar.

And maybe the only really good news you'll hear this month doesn't come from a news outlet but from an ancient story. Maybe the only realistic hope for our world does not come from the Republicans or the Democrats. Maybe we still need to dream about that "little child" who will lead even the lion and the lamb in perfect harmony.

## TRANSFORMATION

At Presbytery this past week, we had a presentation about church transformation. (By the way, ten churches in our Presbytery participated in a program of church transformation this past year, and six of those ten churches had significant gains in membership, and some of those churches haven't had a winning season for many years.) So, as you might expect, we were being encouraged to become a part of a new transformation process that will begin this February. I plan to ask our Session to do just that.

But, the chair of that committee was quite clear on what church transformation was and what it wasn't. He said that church transformation did not begin with a new program. Church transformation began with a new vision. Church transformation began with a new way of looking at our church and the world. He quoted a famous line from Proverbs, "Without a vision the people perish."

And then he quit preaching and went to meddling by suggesting that it was my job to cast the vision. He said that if church transformation is ever to take place, the pastor must first be transformed.

Pastors get to see more pain and sorrow than most. We see the tragedy of lives snuffed out too soon. We see the hypocrisy of church leaders who say one thing and then do another. We are often frustrated by a lack of resources and commitment.

But, and this is the hardest part of all to deal with, we know that much of what is wrong with the church is due to our own lack of faith at critical times. How can we lead God's people when we are so broken and wounded by life?

I would like to place the blame for failure on someone else, but when it comes right down to it, none of us have control of anything ... even our own behavior. The great Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans decried the fact that the things he shouldn't be doing were the very things that he did, and the things that he should be doing were the things that he neglected.

Paul wrote that a long time ago, but I bet you've experienced that same frustration. Even when we accomplish our goals there can be a sense of emptiness and frustration. There's this sense that we're not on the right track.

Paul as he reflected upon his lack of faithfulness shouted out a question, "All this failure is killing me! Who will deliver me?"

And then Paul wrote,

"The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does. He acted to set things right in this life of contradictions where I want to serve God with all my heart and mind, but am pulled by the influence of sin to do something totally different." Romans 7:25 (MsgB)

## A VISION OF THE PERFECT SAVIOR

That's the vision. It's not the vision of a perfect world or a perfect church or even a perfect pastor.

It's the vision of a perfect Savior. According to our passage for today the Spirit resides upon this Savior. He will have the wisdom and the understanding to tell us what we need to hear. He will give us the vision that will transform our understanding of what is possible and what is impossible. He will tell us what is true and what is false.

You might say that this is not happening in our world. You see the evil winning. The wolves are eating the lambs. The unrighteous are ruling the world and things seem to be getting worse than ever. Are you saying pastor that we should be like the ostrich and just stick our head in the sand while all this happens?



I am not saying that. We need to take a hard look at sin in our world beginning with our sinfulness, our own complicity in this death dealing world.

But, God in Christ has introduced a new Spirit, a new reality into this world. And it is our job to witness to that reality. It is our job to pay attention not only to what is happening in Washington but also what is happening in the remote fields of Palestine. It is our job to look for those events in our lives and in our world where God might be at work and try to become a part of that new vision. To paraphrase our Book of Order, we are called to be a provisional demonstration of the Kingdom of God.

### KNOWING THE SAME WORLD DIFFERENTLY

A poet once wrote, "It is difficult to get the news from poetry ... yet people die every day from lack of what is found there." The Bible is filled with poetry because it is expressing a hope that is in many ways above and beyond this world. And yet it is this hope that has the power to transform our world.

The Apostle Paul wrote, "We look not at what can be seen but what cannot be seen. For what can be seen is temporary and what cannot be seen is eternal." Professor Timothy Luke Johnson, commenting on those words wrote, "Faith does not know a different world from the one measured and calculated by science, but it knows the same world differently."

I guess that's what I would like for us to accomplish this Christmas season. I would like for us to know the same world differently.

PC Enniss, the theologian in residence at the Trinity Presbyterian Church in Atlanta told the story about Ruby Bridges. Ruby was a little six year old African American child who was one of the first to integrate the New Orleans public school system.

This struggle went on for weeks and months. The federal marshals would escort Ruby to school every day, and every day there would be an angry crowd hurling racial insults at this little girl every morning. And then in the

afternoon the story would be the same. The federal marshals would escort the little girl home as the crowd would hurl their insults again.

It got so bad that most white parents pulled their children out of the public school system. Ruby went to school by herself for most of that first term.

The situation caught the attention of Robert Coles, Harvard child psychologist. And so Coles went to New Orleans, interviewed and spent time with Ruby and with her parents. He interviewed her teacher, asked how she thought Ruby could tolerate such continual adversity and abuse.

Listen to the verbatim from that teacher:

“I was standing in the classroom looking out the window. I saw Ruby coming down the street with the federal marshals on both sides of her. The crowd was there shouting as usual.

A woman spat at Ruby, but missed. Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her. Ruby smiled. And then she walked up the steps, and she stopped and turned around and smiled one more time. You know what she told one of those marshals? She told him she prays for those people, the ones in that mob. She prays for them every night before going to sleep.”

The interview prompted Coles to speak directly to Ruby about her prayers.

"Yes," Ruby said, "I do pray for them."

Coles asked, "Why? Why would you pray for people who are so mean to you and say such bad things about you?"

"Because Mama said I should."

Coles pressed.

Ruby said,

"I go to church. I go to church every Sunday, and we're told to pray for people, even bad people. Mama says it's true. My minister says the same thing. 'We don't have to worry,' he says. He came to our house, and he say, 'God is watching over us.' He say, 'If I forgive the people and smile at them

and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and he'll protect us."

Coles asked if she thought the minister was on the right track.

"Oh, yes," Ruby said. And then in a way of explanation,

"I'm sure God knows what is happening. God's got a lot to worry about, but there's bad trouble here. God can't help but notice. He may not do anything right now, but there will come a day, like they say in church, there will come a day. You can count on it. That's what they say in church."

"And a little child will lead them."

Amen.